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SHORT STUDIES IN SHAKESPEARE

By the Same Author

DICK: A Story without a Plot

THE LANCHESTER TRADITION

FOR THIS I HAD BORNE HIM

THE AWAKENING OF BITTLESHAM

REAPING THE WHIRLWIND, and other Poems

JOHN MURRAY

ABOUT SHAKESPEARE AND HIS PLAYS

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

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SHORT STUDIES IN SHAKESPEARE

By
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PREFACE

None of these studies claims to be exhaustive, but it is hoped that they may at least prove suggestive. Shakespeare has often suffered in the past from the kind of reverence which places him, alone among poets, beyond the range of criticism. But to treat him as an object of blind worship, to find in everything that he wrote the consummate expression of consummate art, is not to do him service. For he could, on occasion, be as careless as he was great, and at times he was evidently obliged by the exigencies of his calling to write without inspiration. A frank recognition of these facts, far from spoiling our enjoyment, does, I think, only enhance our sense of his greatness. Like his great contemporary and critic, Ben Jonson, we learn to "love the man," and all the more by keeping "on this side idolatry."

It need, I hope, hardly be added that the object of this book is not to discover flaws in Shakespeare's workmanship, but to present, in as concise a form as possible, certain problems of literary or psychological interest; in some cases to suggest a solution; and, most of all, to incite the reader to study the subject-matter for himself in the original.

The essay entitled *The Problems of Hamlet* was published separately in pamphlet form in 1928, and is included here, with some alterations, by the kind permission of the Oxford University Press. None of the other studies has previously appeared in print.

All references are to the Temple Classics Edition of Shakespeare.

G. F. B.

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I

THE SONNETS

I

THE SONNETS

It may seem worse than audacious to write about the *Sonnets* without having some new theory to propound, some old one to demolish, or at least some suggestion to offer for a regrouping of these poems. The seeker after hidden treasure has long made them his happy hunting-ground, with the result that, for the ordinary man, they have become enveloped in a certain atmosphere of mystery. "With this key Shakespeare unlocked his heart." Possibly; only, if he did, hardly any two writers are agreed as to how the contents should be catalogued.

But there are treasures in the *Sonnets* which are neither hidden nor mysterious. For it is always open to us, if we choose to do so, to enjoy them simply as poetry; and, whatever else he may have had in his mind, Shakespeare certainly thought of them as poetry, even as great poetry. If then we are content to enjoy them simply as literature, there are certain things to be said about them, which are not at all recondite, but which are worth repeating from time to time, if only as a warning to the reader of what he need *not* expect to find.

But before we can get to the business of criticism, we must give as brief an account as possible of the subject-matter of these poems, and of such facts as

are known about their history. The general theme is an idealised male friendship " passing the love of women," a topic which sounds strange to us, but which was familiar to, and approved by, the romantic Elizabethans. One hundred and twenty-six of the sonnets are addressed to a powerful and handsome young nobleman, and form a sequence; the remaining twenty-eight to a dark lady who, after being the poet's mistress, transferred her affections to his friend. We are led to infer that when he wrote them, Shakespeare contemplated publishing at least those numbered I–CXXVI, for he constantly speaks of them as the monument which is to make his friend immortal, and immortality could hardly have been achieved except in print. They are first mentioned in 1598 (at which date Shakespeare was thirty-four years old) by Francis Meres, in his *Palladis Tamia*, or *Wits Treasury*, and he applies to them the very appropriate epithet, " sugar'd." They were being privately circulated among the poet's friends, and in such a connection " privately " has no great significance. In the following year, 1599, two of them (CXXXVIII and CLIV) were included in a volume called *The Passionate Pilgrim*, and published by Jaggard; but no complete edition appeared till 1609, when the *Sonnets* as we know them, together with a poem called *A Lover's Complaint*, were printed in book form " by G. ELD for T. T." This edition has an exasperatingly cryptic dedication, written, it should be noticed, not by Shakespeare but by the publisher.

TO . THE . ONLIE . BEGETTER . OF .
THESE . INSVING . SONNETS .
Mr W. H. ALL . HAPPINESSE .
AND . THAT . ETERNITIE .
PROMISED
BY .
OUR . EVER-LIVING . POET .
WISHETH .
THE . WELL-WISHING
ADVENTVRER . IN .
SETTING .
FORTH .

T. T.

The most likely " begetter " would be the Earl of Southampton, who is known to have been Shakespeare's friend and patron, and who had accepted the dedication of *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece*. But how are we to reconcile Henry Wriothesley with " Mr W. H." ? Possibly T. T. was misinformed about the begetter, though by this time the secret, if there ever was any secret, must have been an open one. Or, possibly, he surmised, or ascertained through friends, that the Earl would not be best pleased to have so much of his private life put into the hands of the vulgar, and therefore deliberately invented " Mr W. H." as a blind. The Elizabethans were not without a sense of humour, nor were they all romantics, and there was much matter in the " sugar'd sonnets " for jests at the expense of their addressee. Such a tag, for example, as " O thou, my lovely boy "

(CXXVI), would surely have been a godsend to any wag, and we can quite understand that the Earl would shrink from being publicly labelled with it. In any case, the identification of "Mr W. H." is of no material importance for our purpose here. Shakespeare, as his plays show, liked gallant and handsome young noblemen, and the *Sonnets* prove that he found one who accepted his friendship and even his worship, whether he were the Earl of Southampton, or the Earl of Pembroke, or somebody else.

The sonnet is Italian in origin and severe in form, and its fourteen lines only afford scope for the development of a single thought. It is as if a painter were given a strictly limited canvas on which to paint his picture. The Petrarchan sonnet, the model most in favour with our great poets, is divided into two sections, an octet which states and develops the subject, followed by a sextet which winds up to a climax. Shakespeare, however, for his own purposes adopted another form, made popular in England by Surrey and Wyatt. It consists of three quatrains which are clinched by a final rhyming couplet. At first sight this form seems to offer a greater freedom of movement than is allowed to the more orthodox and severer type. But there are many hidden traps in it. For one thing, the climax has to be effected in two lines, often a very hampering restriction, and one which in a sonnet-sequence is apt to become monotonous. For another, there is a temptation to repeat the theme three times in three successive quatrains, and the thought does not always bear the strain. We have an example of this in Sonnet XXX :

When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
I summon up remembrance of things past,
I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought,
And with old woes new wail my dear time's waste:
Then can I drown an eye, unused to flow,
For precious friends hid in death's dateless night,

Except for line 4, with its forced antithesis and its deliberate and rather heavy alliteration, this is perfect poetry; but the sonnet proceeds:

And weep afresh love's long since cancell'd woe,
And moan the expense of many a vanish'd sight:
Then can I grieve at grievances foregone,
And heavily from woe to woe tell o'er
The sad account of fore-bemoaned moan,
Which I new pay as if not paid before.

And in this plethora of wails and woes and moans the thought, which began so beautifully, dies in a surfeit of its own excess.

In all the greatest art there is a certain quality of reticence, and a real, though not always apparent, simplicity. Nowhere are we more conscious of this than in Shakespeare's greatest work. It is the secret of the almost intolerable pathos of the waking scene in *King Lear* (Act IV, Sc. vii, ll. 41–85); and, almost invariably, the magic of his sublimest utterances comes to us in the simplest language:

We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep. (*Tempest.*)

Finish, dear lady, the bright day is done,
And we are for the dark. (*Antony and Cleopatra.*)

When we are born we cry, that we are come
To this great stage of fools. (*King Lear.*)

The moon shines bright ; in such a night as this,
When the sweet wind did gently kiss the trees
And they did make no noise, in such a night
Troilus methinks mounted the Trojan walls,
And sighed his soul toward the Grecian tents,
Where Cressid lay that night.
(*Merchant of Venice.*)

Here there is no conscious effort, no striving after cleverness ; the wonderful thing is said quietly, simply, inevitably ; and " the rest is silence."

This quality of restrained feeling, conspicuous in the great sonnets of Milton and of Wordsworth, is hardly perceptible in the sonnets of Shakespeare. They have all the defects and mannerisms, as well as the merits, of his early style ; and his early style could be boyishly exuberant. At his worst he is always a master of language and can coin the most felicitous phrases ; but he is also a great juggler with words, and will sometimes pause to perform his conjuring tricks, when we should prefer to have him writing poetry. Ben Jonson regretted that he did not stop oftener to think before he wrote, and that he never revised what he had written ; and there are many occasions in the early plays when we feel obliged to agree with Ben Jonson. For, until he learned in his greatest period to put a curb on it, Shakespeare's fancy was apt to run away with him. Image came treading on the heels of image, and he must out with them all, without censorship or selec-

tion, till it was necessary to pause for breath. Here is a typical passage from *King Richard II* :

> O, who can hold a fire in his hand
> By thinking on the frosty Caucasus ?
> Or cloy the hungry edge of appetite
> By bare imagination of a feast ?
> Or wallow naked in December snow
> By thinking on fantastic summer's heat ?
> O, no ! the apprehension of the good
> Gives but the greater feeling to the worse :
> Fell sorrow's tooth doth never rankle more
> Than when he bites, but lanceth not the sore.
> (Act I, Sc. iii, l. 294.)

This may surely be called " vain repetition," and we can find any number of parallels in the *Sonnets*. One must suffice here—No. LXVII :

> Ah, wherefore with infection should he live
> And with his presence grace impiety,
> That sin by him advantage should achieve
> And lace itself with his society ?
> Why should false painting imitate his cheek,
> And steal dead seeing of his living hue ?
> Why should poor beauty indirectly seek
> Roses of shadow, since his rose is true ?
> Why should he live, now Nature bankrupt is,
> Beggar'd of blood to blush through lively veins ?
> For she hath no exchequer now but his,
> And, proud of many, lives upon his gains.

Ars est celare artem ; but there is no attempt here to conceal the art, nor in any other of the *Sonnets*. All the tricks of the trade, known to the Elizabethans

and admired by them, are there in rich profusion—antithesis, laboured alliteration, "conceits," repetitions, word-play, and mere puns. And Shakespeare takes an obvious pleasure in proving his skill at the game. Here are a few examples, taken at random from the first fifty sonnets.

Or what strong hand can hold his swift foot back ?

Shall Time's best jewel from Time's chest lie hid ?

Thy adverse party is thy advocate.

A closet never pierced with crystal eyes.

What can mine own praise to mine own self bring ?
And what is't but mine own when I praise thee ?

And when a woman woos, what woman's son
Will sourly leave her till she have prevail'd ?

Were it not thy sour leisure gave sweet leave.

By praising him here who doth hence remain.

When day's oppression is not eased by night,
But day by night, and night by day oppress'd.

If I lose thee, my loss is my love's gain,
And losing her, my friend hath found that loss.

But, ah, thought kills me that I am not thought,
To leap large lengths of miles when thou art gone.

These present-absent with swift motion slide.

And every fair from fair sometimes declines.

Making a couplement of proud compare.

Duty so great which wit so poor as mine
May make seem bare in wanting words to show it.

All these tricks, these studied compliments, constantly repeated, create an air of artificiality. Poetry is not merely a verbal appeal to the ear, and, if it is to move us, it must at least have been deeply felt by the poet who conceived it. We cannot penetrate far into the *Sonnets* without beginning to ask ourselves, " how much of what he says does Shakespeare really mean ? " To take an example, in No. XXVII he writes :

Weary with toil, I haste me to my bed,
The dear repose for limbs with travel tired ;
But then begins a journey in my head,
To work my mind, when body's work's expired :
For then my thoughts, from far where I abide,
Intend a zealous pilgrimage to thee,
And keep my drooping eyelids open wide,
Looking on darkness which the blind do see :
Save that my soul's imaginary sight
Presents thy shadow to my sightless view,
Which, like a jewel hung in ghastly night,
Makes black night beauteous and her old face new.
Lo, thus, by day my limbs, by night my mind,
For thee and for myself no quiet find.

Is that a record of experience, or a feat of invention? Is it friendship or flattery, or a combination of the two ? In any case, the language, though comparatively restrained for the *Sonnets*, strikes us at first sight as excessive, seeing that it is used by a

man to a man. But in this connection we must remember that, in Shakespeare's age, friendship and compliment were far more ebullient things than they are to-day. It was a merit in a compliment to be ingenious, elaborate, highly coloured ; and there was no contempt for the trowel as an instrument for laying on praise. Nobody would have felt that a poet was debasing himself by writing to his patron as Shakespeare writes in Sonnet XXXVIII :

> Be thou the tenth Muse, ten times more in worth
> Than those old nine which rhymers invocate ;
> And he that calls on thee, let him bring forth
> Eternal numbers to outlive long date.

They would only have thought that the poet was smart ; and the poet would have agreed with them.

For the language of friendship and compliment is a matter of convention, and conventions change from age to age. Our own age is rather severely reticent. We dislike rhetoric ; we cultivate irony ; and, except when we are writing testimonials, we shrink instinctively from exaggeration. Advertisements and the Press have cheapened all superlative words. We prefer not to discuss our deeper feelings and emotions, and, if we do speak of them, we do so in terms that are something less than the truth. In one of Mr. Galsworthy's novels, *Swan Song*, a young husband, deeply in love with his beautiful wife, addresses her as " Old thing." That would have been worse than a slap in the face to an Elizabethan lady. For in the sixteenth century friendship, even friendship between men, was some-

thing romantic, and used the language of love freely and unashamedly. When Tennyson, who had a good deal of the Elizabethan in him, wrote of his friend Hallam,

> My Arthur, whom I shall not see
> Till all my widow'd race be run;
> Dear as the mother to the son,
> More than my brothers are to me,

he shocked many even of his admirers. He would not have shocked Shakespeare's contemporaries.

There is a little scene in *Henry V* which shows to what lengths demonstrativeness could go without offending the current standards of good taste. Exeter is describing the death of the Dukes of York and Suffolk on the field of Agincourt:

> Suffolk first died: and York, all haggled over,
> Comes to him, where in gore he lay insteep'd,
> And takes him by the beard; *kisses* the gashes
> That bloodily did yawn upon his face;
> And cries aloud 'Tarry, dear cousin Suffolk!
> My soul shall thine keep company to heaven;
> Tarry, sweet soul, for mine, then fly abreast.'
> (Act IV, Sc. vi, l. 11.)

Can anybody imagine a similar scene being enacted in the Great War?

This difference of convention, combined with the conscious art of the poems, makes it difficult for us to disentangle Shakespeare's real feelings from the language in which he wraps them. Was he only making literature out of a licensed theme, writing

from his brain rather than from his heart? Was devotion a mere gambit in a clever game, or was he indeed devoted? I think it is worth noting that there is no friendship in the plays similar to that described in these poems.[1] Friends there are, great friends (Hamlet and Horatio for example), but they do not speak the language of the *Sonnets*. It is true that the plays are not autobiography: yet, if friendship could really be for Shakespeare so deeply emotional an experience, it is strange that he never introduced it into any of his dramas. Perhaps he himself would have admitted that most of the sentiment in these poems was false sentiment of a conventional type, proper to a sonnet-sequence, but not to drama, whose object is to "hold the mirror up to Nature." Anyhow, it is a fact that, though Shakespeare is an infinitely greater poet than Tennyson, for a sincere expression of passionate friendship between man and man we turn to *In Memoriam* rather than to the *Sonnets*.

For the sonnet-sequence, I–CXXVI, is in essence a sequence of compliments; the compliments often degenerate into flattery, and the flattery becomes fulsome (e.g. XIX and XLVI). Probably in all ages people of culture and breeding would have regarded No. XX as an offence against good taste—a lapse which we may regret, but can easily pardon in the clever but self-educated young poet from Stratford, indulging a fashionable taste for exaggerated praise, and not quite knowing where to draw the line. Few people are quite insensible to flattery; but if

[1] Perhaps we ought to except *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*.

the young man who received the worship of the *Sonnets* was not inordinately vain, he must sometimes have felt as if he were being drowned in honey.

At the same time, it would be palpably wrong to assume that the *Sonnets* are all flattery and no friendship. We do from time to time catch a note which sounds like spontaneity. No. XXIX, for instance, seems to sound such a note.

When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone beweep my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself, and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featured like him, like him with friends possess'd,
Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least ;
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate ;
For thy sweet love remember'd such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

Remembering its context, we shall not try to squeeze too much out of " my outcast state." The poet is obviously contrasting his own lot with that of his friend. The son of John Shakespeare was not born under a lucky star. In London he had had to begin at the bottom of the ladder and make his way upwards, in despite of many jealous rivals, and, for a while, without influential friends. On the whole, it seems reasonable to suppose that there is in the

Sonnets a genuine kernel of strong and rather emotional friendship, and that the emotional side is deliberately heightened for the purposes of art. In fact, the picture is a fancy picture, based, like legend, on fact, but not a portrait by Rembrandt.

But other feelings than friendship have a place in these poems, and, if we can in any way gauge their depth, they may serve as some guide to the intensity of feeling in the *Sonnets* as a whole.

Age, in its early phases, seldom draws attention to its infirmities ; in fact, it generally hopes that they will escape detection. But men in the prime of life, especially if they are poets, in certain moods love to toy with the idea that they are growing old and weary and disillusioned, and that the grave is gaping for them. There need be nothing really morbid in such a mood ; we all like to find pathos in ourselves, and Shakespeare, the most human of all great geniuses, was human in this too. He can hardly have been more than thirty-five years old when he wrote Sonnet LXXIII, which begins :

> That time of year thou mayst in me behold
> When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
> Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
> Bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.

Whether true of their author or not, these are lines of exquisite beauty, and only Shakespeare could have written them. The rest of the poem is somewhat commonplace, and the similes used are the conventional ones, the twilight of evening, and the dying fire.

In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire,
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the death-bed whereon it must expire,
Consumed with that which it was nourish'd by.

As a consequence, the poet expects an early death :

This thou perceivest, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

Very pretty, but obviously not meant to be taken too literally. For the next twelve years or more of prodigious activity the dying fire was going to burn with an ever-increasing heat.

And there are the sonnets which speak of disgust with himself and with life :

Tired with all these, for restful death I cry,
As, to behold desert a beggar born,
And needy nothing trimm'd in jollity,
And purest faith unhappily forsworn,
And gilded honour shamefully misplaced,
And maiden virtue rudely strumpeted,
And right perfection wrongfully disgraced,
And strength by limping sway disabled,
And art made tongue-tied by authority,
And folly, doctor-like, controlling skill,
And simple truth miscall'd simplicity,
And captive good attending captain ill :
Tired with all these, from these would I be gone,
Save that, to die, I leave my love alone.
(LXVI.)

This, too, is a common mood with sensitive poets, an angry mood in which they take a savage pleasure

in painting life in the blackest colours. We recall a similar, though less vindictive passage, in Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale*:

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
What thou among the leaves hast never known,
The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden-eyed despairs;
Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow.

And these are not the most convincing lines in that beautiful poem.

There is self-scorn, too, in Sonnet CX:

Alas, 'tis true I have gone here and there,
And made myself a motley to the view,
Gored mine own thoughts, sold cheap what is most dear,
Made old offences of affections new;
Most true it is that I have look'd on truth
Askance and strangely.

This is the inevitable remorse, in sober moments, of a talented young man with serious ambitions, whose company is much in request, who feels that he has cheapened his wit—made himself a motley to the view—and who has incidentally sown some wild oats.

With all his zest in life, his joy in the body, and his indulgence of the senses, Shakespeare always valued the things of the spirit and that serenity of soul which

transcends all pleasures. In the best of the sonnets he is feeling after both. The conflict in man between his soul and the flaws and passions of human nature was one of the aspects of life which puzzled him most, and it forms the substance of the great tragedies. But, at the time when most of the sonnets were written, he was still in the heyday of early manhood, and content to enjoy life, rather than question it about its hidden secrets.

In Sonnet CXI there is an attempt at self-excuse :

O, for my sake do you with Fortune chide,
The guilty goddess of my harmful deeds,
That did not better for my life provide
Than public means which public manners breeds.

But we cannot take the remorse very seriously which ends up, almost gaily, with

Pity me then, dear friend, and I assure ye
Even that your pity is enough to cure me.

Sonnet CXIX seems at first sight to strike a deeper note :

What potions have I drunk of Siren tears,
Distill'd from limbecks foul as hell within,
Applying fears to hopes and hopes to fears,
Still losing when I saw myself to win !
What wretched errors hath my heart committed,
Whilst it hath thought itself so blessed never !
How have mine eyes out of their spheres been fitted,
In the distraction of this madding fever !

But, when we read on, we cannot help suspecting that the gloom of these lines is deliberately deepened, in order to add point to what follows :

O benefit of ill ! Now I find true
That better is by evil still made better ;
And ruin'd love, when it is built anew,
Grows fairer than at first, more strong, far greater.
So I return rebuked to my content,
And gain by ill thrice more than I have spent.

A dangerous maxim to live by, if it were meant seriously.

Shakespeare, when he was really moved, could find wonderful language to express disgust and disillusionment. We remember *Hamlet* :

For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office, and the spurns
That patient merit of the unworthy takes ?

And *Measure for Measure* :

But man, proud man !
Drest in a little brief authority,—
Most ignorant of what he's most assured,
His glassy essence,—like an angry ape,
Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven
As make the angels weep.

Compared with this, the language of LXVI sounds almost tame.

Sonnets I–CXXVI are all addressed to the young

man, and we seem to understand what is happening. The poet is describing the vicissitudes and triumphs of an ideal friendship, its trials, misunderstandings, reconciliations, and sacrifices, till with a generous gesture he resigns his own mistress to the younger man, rather than risk a breach. The attitude is studied, there is unity of form and feeling, the language is the language of the polite society of the day, very heavily sugared.

But then we come to the sonnets addressed to the dark lady, and, almost immediately, the mill-pool becomes a maelstrom, the honey turns to gall. It is true that there is still some honey left. No. CXXVIII, for example, is a charming gallantry. No. CXLV is quite a pleasant "conceit"; CXXXV and CXXXVI are almost entirely taken up with wearisome puns on the poet's name, "Will"; CLIII and CLIV, undoubtedly early ones, are pretty compliments, in the classical style, to the lady's eyes. They obviously owe their place in the sequence to a desire on the part of the publisher to sandwich the bitter in between the sweet, and give the appearance of a happy ending.[1] But the rest make strange reading. Nos. CXXX and CXXXVII must surely have had an immense *succès de scandale* when they were published in 1609, for it is incredible that they can have formed part of those "sugar'd sonnets" which Francis Meres knew of in 1598. No. CXXIX is a startling homily on lust. In CXXX the lover gives a crude description of his mistress's lack of beauty, "If hairs be wires, black

[1] The order of this series is purely arbitrary; CXLIII, for example, must be earlier than its context.

wires grow on her head." In CXXXVII he tells of her lack of morals with an even more brutal frankness. In most of the others he is shaken by jealousy, rage, and despair. He says the most wounding things he can think of, and then upbraids the lady for hating him; threatens and cajoles, denounces and pleads for pity, and closes No. CXLVII with a resounding smack on the face:

For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright,
Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.

All of which gives the lie direct to the resigned gesture with which he had abandoned the lady to his friend.

In CXLIII we have a glimpse of the Shakespeare whom we always find implicit in his plays, affectionate, forgiving, unable to keep up a quarrel even when he felt deeply wronged: the "gentle Shakespeare" of Ben Jonson's commendatory verse in the First Folio. With its homely simile, its "kiss me, be kind," and its simple close, it is perhaps, in spite of its pun in line 13, the most arresting and beautiful of the sonnets.

Lo, as a careful housewife runs to catch
One of her feather'd creatures broke away,
Sets down her babe, and makes all swift dispatch
In pursuit of the thing she would have stay;
Whilst her neglected child holds her in chase,
Cries to catch her whose busy care is bent
To follow that which flies before her face,
Not prizing her poor infant's discontent:
So runn'st thou after that which flies from thee,
Whilst I thy babe chase thee afar behind;

But if thou catch thy hope, turn back to me,
And play the mother's part, kiss me, be kind :
So will I pray that thou mayst have thy " Will,"
If thou turn back and my loud crying still.

But it is only a fleeting glimpse ; the predominant mood of the series CXXIX–CLII is a very bitter mood. It is the mood of *Troilus and Cressida*, that strange play in which Shakespeare turned and deliberately trampled on the romantic love and chivalry which had been the staple of his Comedies. We cannot dissociate the dark lady from Cressida, nor can we doubt that she counted deeply in Shakespeare's experience of life. Through her he learned the tyranny of lust, the torture of the divided will where longing and loathing go hand in hand, the enslavement of reason by the senses. And to Shakespeare reason was the godlike thing in man :

Sure, he that made us with such large discourse,
Looking before and after, gave us not
This capability and god-like reason
To fust in us unused. (*Hamlet.*)

What a piece of work is a man ! how noble in reason ! how infinite in faculty ! in form and moving how express and admirable ! in action how like an angel ! in apprehension how like a god ! (*Hamlet.*)

Through her too and his relations with her, he understood the weakness of Antony and the seductions of Cleopatra. Possibly we may lay to her account also some of the worst things said by Hamlet to Ophelia. This bitter mood, however, was alien to Shakespeare's natural temper, and it did not alter

the main currents of his life. It is the pathos of life, not its littleness, which inspires his tragedies. Only we sometimes see it in the plays, moving like a black shadow across the landscape.

Apart from this, what do we learn about him from the *Sonnets*? Perhaps they help us to see him as he must have appeared to his fellows and acquaintances during the London years in which he was beginning to win recognition: immensely clever and versatile, but not a scholar like many of his rivals; a loyal, trustworthy man, though a little wild at times; pleased with the success of his two published poems, proud of his great friend, proud of his sonnets, and strangely indifferent to, perhaps even unaware of, his stupendous genius as a dramatist. That, I think, but not much more.

Everyone, who is at all familiar with the plays, knows the voice in which Shakespeare speaks the deepest things of the heart. We hardly ever hear that voice in the *Sonnets*. Still, we have no right to quarrel with the *Sonnets* because they are not the great tragedies. They are a specialised form of literature, and must be judged as such. There is superb poetry in them, often in single lines, more rarely in perfect poems; and these gain appreciably by being removed from their context. Such a one is Sonnet CXVI.

> Let me not to the marriage of true minds
> Admit impediments. Love is not love
> Which alters when it alteration finds,
> Or bends with the remover to remove:
> O, no! it is an ever-fixed mark,
> That looks on tempests and is never shaken;

It is the star to every wandering bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come ;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

But, taken as a whole, the *Sonnets* suffer inevitably from their theme, the glorification of a type of friendship which makes no particular appeal to us. Often we feel inclined to echo Queen Gertrude and say, the poet "doth protest too much methinks," or to cry with her, "More matter with less art." In fact, there are moments when the *Sonnets* become a little tedious. In many of them the thought is involved and obscure ; we cannot follow it without effort and a close attention to the punctuation. Many of them are merely exercises in intellectual subtlety ; many are experiments in word-embroidery ; many only repeat things which have been said already and which we are not eager to hear again ; and all, or nearly all, bear the stamp of conscious art. But Shakespeare is always greatest when he is least artificial. We think of the lyrics, of the dirge in *Cymbeline* :

Fear no more the heat o' the sun
Nor the furious winter's rages ;
Thou thy worldly task hast done,
Home art gone and ta'en thy wages :
Golden lads and girls all must,
As chimney-sweepers, come to dust.

Fear no more the frown o' the great,
  Thou art past the tyrant's stroke ;
Care no more to clothe and eat ;
  To thee the reed is as the oak :
The sceptre, learning, physic, must
All follow this and come to dust.

Fear no more the lightning-flash
  Nor the all-dreaded thunder-stone ;
Fear not slander, censure rash ;
  Thou hast finished joy and moan :
All lovers young, all lovers must
Consign to thee and come to dust.

There is more real magic in these deceptively simple lines than in the whole of *Venus and Adonis* or the elaborate art of the *Sonnets*. But did Shakespeare himself know this ?

II

KING RICHARD II

II

KING RICHARD II

§ 1. Its Poetry

Richard II was first published in 1597 in what is known as the Quarto Edition, but it was almost certainly written about the year 1593 ; that is to say, before the poet had reached his thirtieth birthday. It has the double interest of promise and achievement. There is no play in which we can more clearly see Shakespeare finding his own genius and freeing himself from the stage traditions which would have hampered its highest flights ; for he did not spring into the world of drama a Pallas fully armed, and his development, though extraordinarily rapid, was always marked and continuous.

In order to realise the achievement of *Richard II*, we must understand what exactly the dramatist had set himself to do in this play. He was, in effect, attempting to make poetry out of historical drama at a time when he was still much under the influence of Marlowe, whose great play, *Edward II*, had appeared in 1590. There is in *Richard II* no prose ; there is no humour ; there is a great deal of rhymed verse, and all the characters, down to the under-gardener and the groom, speak the same poetic language. In short, the object aimed at is a poetic

unity rather than the colour and variety of real life. When he had mastered his art, Shakespeare knew how to combine both; but in this play dramatic truth is often (and not always successfully) sacrificed in the attempt to create a certain kind of beauty.

The dominant note is the pathos which gathers round the head of fallen greatness. In Elizabethan eyes a fallen monarch was always a tragic figure, even if he had richly deserved to fall. For monarchy was still regarded as a divine institution. The King was the Lord's Anointed, his deputy on earth; and, if he failed in his stewardship, it was God's business to punish him, not that of his subjects. Treason contained an element of sacrilege, and was the blackest of black crimes. This is the view taken by Gaunt and York in this play, and York only acquiesces, reluctantly, in Bolingbroke's usurpation, because he sees in it the hand of God (Act V, Sc. ii, l. 37):

> But heaven hath a hand in these events.

Kings were kings by divine right in Tudor days, and Richard does not overstate the generally accepted view when he says (Act III, Sc. ii, l. 54):

> Not all the water in the rough rude sea
> Can wash the balm off from an anointed king.

In order therefore to win the sympathy of an audience for Richard in adversity, there was no actual need to mitigate his former offences or to invest him in the early scenes with any kind of personal charm, though, of course, the tragic effect

would have been heightened, if he had done less to deserve his fate.

Shakespeare, so far as he had any political theories, belonged to his own age. He knew that kings were no better than other men, but he believed in monarchy. He certainly did not believe in the wisdom of the mass mind, and he held, like Wellington, that civil war was the greatest of all calamities. The Wars of the Roses had planted that conviction deep in the minds of most of his fellow-countrymen. He does not attempt to minimise the faults and vices which led to Richard's downfall; but, when once the downfall is complete, there is no doubt as to where his own sympathies lie. That, indeed, was always Shakespeare's way. The flaws in human nature, its arrogance, its cruelty, its stupidity are terrible things; but, as soon as they are expiated in suffering, he feels nothing but compassion, whether the sufferer be Richard II or Lady Macbeth. The punishment is just and inevitable, but the result, to him, is pathos. He had none of the Puritan's gloomy satisfaction in the thought, "This is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes."

In *Richard II*, therefore, he found a theme eminently suited for poetic treatment. But there are many kinds of poetry. In this play we can distinguish three.

(1) There is what we may call stage poetry, the booming, bombastic rhetoric made popular by Marlowe and other contemporaries of Shakespeare who, though he cultivated it in his early days, and was always liable to slip back into it when he was tired

or lazy, soon recoiled from its excesses and poked some sly fun at it. It is a language "full of sound and fury," and, though it could produce fine lines, and stirred an Elizabethan audience, to our ears it conveys more noise than music. It was considered appropriate to the description of martial feats, challenges, and the business of war generally. Almost the whole of Act I in *Richard II* is written in this style; and it recurs at intervals in the rest of the play; as for example in Act IV, Sc. i, ll. 1–106. Here are a few specimens:

BOLING. Once more, the more to aggravate the note,
With a foul traitor's name stuff I thy throat.
(Act I, Sc. i, l. 43.)

MOW. Then, Bolingbroke, as low as to thy heart,
Through the false passage of thy throat, thou liest.
(Act I, Sc. i, l. 124.)

RICH. Draw near,
And list what with our council we have done.
For that our kingdom's earth should not be soil'd
With that dear blood which it hath fostered;
And for our eyes do hate the dire aspect
Of civil wounds plough'd up with neighbours' sword;
And for we think the eagle-winged pride
Of sky-aspiring and ambitious thoughts,
With rival-hating envy, set on you
To wake our peace, which in our country's cradle
Draws the sweet infant breath of gentle sleep;
Which so roused up with boisterous untuned drums,
With harsh-resounding trumpets' dreadful bray,
And grating shock of wrathful iron arms,
Might from our quiet confines fright fair peace,

And make us wade even in our kindred's blood ;
Therefore, we banish you our territories.
(Act I, Sc. iii, ll. 123–39.)

The " grating shock of wrathful iron arms " is only first cousin once removed to Bottom's

The raging rocks
And shivering shocks
Shall break the locks
Of prison-gates,

and one cannot help wondering whether, when he wrote it, Shakespeare was not humouring his audience rather than pleasing himself.

(2) There is the quieter, but even more artificial, style which deals in " conceits," word-play, and antithesis, especially the contrast between sweet and sour, day and night, joy and woe. At its best this style can make very melodious music ; at its worst it becomes a rather fatiguing trick. There are many lines in *Richard II* which might have come straight out of the *Sonnets*.

And hope to joy is little less in joy
Than hope enjoy'd.
(Act II, Sc. iii, l. 15.)

Sweet love, I see, changing his property,
Turns to the sourest and most deadly hate.
(Act III, Sc. ii, l. 135.)

A king, woe's slave, shall kingly woe obey.
(Act III, Sc. ii, l. 210.)

The sly slow hours shall not determinate
The dateless limit of thy dear exile.
(Act I, Sc. iii, l. 150.)

There can be no doubt that at this period of his life Shakespeare very much enjoyed playing these tricks with words. In this play he adopts this style, whenever grief is the argument : sometimes very prettily :

QUEEN. What sport shall we devise here in this garden,
To drive away the heavy thought of care ?
LADY. Madam, we'll play at bowls.
QUEEN. 'Twill make me think the world is full of rubs,
And that my fortune runs against the bias.
LADY. Madam, we'll dance.
QUEEN. My legs can keep no measure in delight,
When my poor heart no measure keeps in grief.
(Act III, Sc. iv, ll. 1–8.)

But, if fancy wanders too far from reality in the search after effect, the result may be something which is hardly distinguishable from the comic, as, for example, when Gaunt, heartening his son to endure exile, advises him as follows :

Think not the king did banish thee,
But thou the king. Woe doth the heavier sit,
Where it perceives it is but faintly borne.
Go, say I sent thee forth to purchase honour
And not the king exiled thee ; or suppose
Devouring pestilence hangs in our air
And thou art flying to a fresher clime :
. . . . .
Suppose the singing birds musicians,
The grass whereon thou tread'st the presence strew'd,
The flowers fair ladies, and thy steps no more
Than a delightful measure or a dance.
(Act I, Sc. iii, l. 279.)

This is one of the very rare passages in which Shakespeare slips into bathos. The style he was affecting lends itself very easily to bathos, but his sense of humour was normally strong enough to purge his "conceits" of the ridiculous. We can only suppose that on this occasion, having deliberately banished humour from his play, he had unconsciously banished it from his own mind too.

(3) And in the midst of all this rather artificial stuff we suddenly hear a quite different voice saying:

> Off goes his bonnet to an oyster wench;
> A brace of draymen bid God speed him well
> And had the tribute of his supple knee.
> (Act I, Sc. iv, l. 31.)

And this is the voice of Shakespeare speaking his own language, that virile, racy, pregnant language, out of which, when he broke from tradition and followed his own genius, he could, whenever he was inspired, make the greatest of all English poetry. And with the language comes a revelation of the man himself behind the play.

> This land of such dear souls, this dear dear land,
> Dear for her reputation through the world,
> . . . . .
> England, bound in with the triumphant sea,
> Whose rocky shore beats back the envious siege
> Of watery Neptune,
> (Act II, Sc. i, l. 57.)

or

> . . . within the hollow crown
> That rounds the mortal temples of a king
> Keeps Death his court, and there the antic sits,

Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp,
Allowing him a breath, a little scene,
To monarchize, be fear'd and kill with looks,
Infusing him with self and vain conceit,
As if this flesh which walls about our life
Were brass impregnable, and, humour'd thus,
Comes at the last and with a little pin
Bores through his castle wall, and farewell king !
(Act III, Sc. ii, l. 160.)

Gaunt and Richard may say these things, but we know that Shakespeare is uttering his own thoughts and emotions through them.

There are occasions in this play when he finds the language of his great tragedies : e.g.

Nay, all of you that stand and look upon,
Whilst that my wretchedness doth bait myself,
Though some of you with Pilate wash your hands,
Showing an outward pity ; yet you Pilates
Have here deliver'd me to my sour cross,
And water cannot wash away your sin.
(Act IV, Sc. i, l. 237.)

But apart from the splendid outburst of Gaunt in Act II, Sc. i, the description of Bolingbroke's entry into London (Act V, Sc. ii), and the best of Richard's speeches, there is not a great deal of the real Shakespeare in *Richard II*. It breaks in, often unexpectedly, in isolated lines, like

Bloody with spurring, fiery-red with haste.
(Act II, Sc. iii, l. 58.)

. . . leaving me no sign,
Save men's opinions and my living blood,
To show the world I am a gentleman.
(Act III, Sc. i, l. 25.)

Madam, I know not, nor I greatly care not;
God knows I had as lief be none as one.
(Act V, Sc. ii, l. 48.)

Or in such phrases as "the caterpillars of the commonwealth" (Act. II, Sc. iii, l. 166); "discomfortable cousin" (Act III, Sc. ii, l. 36); "boys, with women's voices, strive to speak big" (Act III, Sc. ii, l. 113); and then, having given a taste of his real quality, Shakespeare harks back to the accepted conventions of poetic drama and wraps his thought once more in what was regarded as the appropriate language. But there is enough of him to show of what flights he was capable at twenty-nine, when he forgot to imitate Marlowe, and spread his own eagle wings. And the effect is heightened by the contrast.

§ 2. Character of Richard

In the opening lines of *Richard III*, and quite early in *Henry IV, Part I*, Shakespeare, by means of a soliloquy, pins a label on to the backs of Richard and Prince Hal respectively, setting forth clearly what kind of men they are. The device is not a very subtle one, but it serves its purpose, and henceforth we can be under no misapprehension about the motives which underlie their conduct. Richard II carries no such label, probably because Shakespeare does not seem to have made any serious attempt to develop Richard Deposed out of Richard King. In the first act he merely records history; he does not interpret it. We are not allowed to see events

through the eyes of any one of the characters; indeed, the dramatist himself seems to adopt the attitude of a mere spectator. It is, perhaps, worth noting that, even in his maturer years, though his imagination would play very vividly over certain parts of the story he was dramatising, other parts of it he was content to leave unillumined and unexplained.

The history recorded here is a tangled web of intrigue, falsehood, cross-swearing, and hypocrisy. The murder of the King's uncle, Thomas of Woodstock, Duke of Gloucester, lies like a dark and mysterious shadow in the background, creating an atmosphere of suspicion and apprehension. Gaunt tells the widow (Act I, Sc. ii) that the King had "caused his [Gloucester's] death," and on his deathbed (Act II, Sc. i, l. 105) he implicitly charges the King with the crime:

> O, had thy grandsire with a prophet's eye
> Seen how his son's son should destroy his sons.

And so in the same scene (l. 182) does York, when he says, of the Black Prince:

> His hands were guilty of no kindred blood.

When, therefore, in the King's presence Bolingbroke charges Mowbray (Act I, Sc. i, l. 100)

> That he did plot the Duke of Gloucester's death,

he is indirectly challenging the King, and Richard

must have known it. Mowbray makes the rather ambiguous reply (*ibid.*, l. 133):

> I slew him not; but to my own disgrace
> Neglected my sworn duty in that case;

which would naturally mean, "I was ordered by the King to kill him, but did not carry out my instructions."

Richard, however, as between Bolingbroke and Mowbray assumes an entirely detached and impartial attitude, and affects to be unaware that his own conduct has been called in question, nor does he in the whole course of the play make any allusion himself, or take up any allusion made by others, to the death of Gloucester.

In the Lists at Coventry (Act I, Sc. iii) he plays an elaborate and solemn farce, for it has already been decided in council (l. 124) that no fight is to take place, and that the would-be combatants are both to be banished. Yet all the preliminaries for a mortal combat are carried out "with awful ceremony and trumpet's sound," and Richard embraces Bolingbroke and says (l. 55):

> Cousin of Hereford, as thy cause is right,
> So be thy fortune in this royal fight!
> Farewell, my blood; which if to-day thou shed,
> Lament we may, but not revenge thee dead.

Even Gaunt, who was present at the council and had concurred in the sentence, plays his part in the make-believe with a good grace (l. 78):

God in thy good cause make thee prosperous!
Be swift like lightning in the execution;
And let thy blows, doubly redoubled,
Fall like amazing thunder on the casque
Of thy adverse pernicious enemy:
Rouse up thy youthful blood, be valiant and live.

"Rare words, brave words," but all play-acting, and they do not enhance our respect for Gaunt. It is only when Bolingbroke, Mowbray, and the spectators have been fooled to the top of their bent, and the two antagonists are on the point of charging, that the warder is thrown down and the farce ends.

We are justified, therefore, in assuming that in Shakespeare's view a real pleasure in duplicity was part of Richard's character. We are also allowed to infer that among the motives which led him to banish Bolingbroke, jealousy was one of the determining factors. There is more than a hint of it in his words to Mowbray (Act I, Sc. i, l. 115):

> Mowbray, impartial are our eyes and ears:
> Were he my brother, nay, my kingdom's heir,
> As he is but my father's brother's son,
> . . . . .
> Such neighbour nearness to our sacred blood
> Should nothing privilege him.

But it is not till after the banishment is a *fait accompli* that he tells us (Act I, Sc. iv, ll. 20–36) how Bolingbroke has been courting the common people and behaving

> As were our England in reversion his,
> And he our subjects' next degree in hope.

A few other traits of character are brought to our attention. The unlawful seizure of Bolingbroke's inheritance, and the farming out of England in order to raise money for the Irish wars, were a part of history; but Shakespeare underlines the callousness of Richard, when "Old John of Gaunt, time-honour'd Lancaster" is on his death-bed (Act I, Sc. iv, l. 59):

> Now put it, God, in the physician's mind
> To help him to his grave immediately!
> . . . . .
> Come, gentlemen, let's all go visit him:
> Pray God we may make haste, and come too late!

And, generally speaking, in Acts I and II Richard has all the faults and vices of an undisciplined and ungracious young man, born to arbitrary power: for, in despite of history, Richard's youth is several times insisted on. We may be sure that, since Richard was destined to be a rather tragic figure in the latter half of the play, Shakespeare, in his maturer art, would have invested him from the first with at least some of the qualities which are not inseparable from greatness. As it is, the first two acts tend to leave us with the impression that Richard is a man without character at all.

The crucial question which the dramatist had to ask himself was this: how would a man vain, arrogant, without judgment or principles, accustomed to the exercise of arbitrary power, behave if he were suddenly overwhelmed by disaster and reduced to impotence? Shakespeare's intuition in such matters

never failed him, and his answer is that such a man would ignore his own responsibility for the disaster, and would think of himself only as a martyr.

But, in order to arouse sympathy in others, self-pity, which is at bottom a form of egotism, must be able to express itself in language of imaginative beauty. If therefore Richard was to create a feeling of pathos it was necessary that he should possess a high poetic faculty. We look in vain for any indication of it in the first two acts : he does, in fact, seem to be somewhat lacking in imagination. Perhaps Shakespeare would have said that in poetic drama all the characters are *ex hypothesi* poets, and that Richard himself does in the first two acts talk a certain kind of poetry. But our difficulty is that he returns from Ireland in Act III, Sc. ii, not merely a poet but a great poet, speaking a language quite different in kind and quality from anything we have heard from him before. It is not so with the great poets in Shakespeare's later plays : Hamlet, Macbeth and Othello, for example. Their true poetic nature impresses us from the moment that they enter upon the stage. But we must accept Richard as he is presented to us, and from Act III, Sc. ii, onwards we find in him a great poet. Indeed, if his language had been anything less than great, his rather copious tears might have washed away our sympathy. For he is the most tearful of all Shakespeare's great characters. He almost revels in sorrow ; he loves to " sit upon the ground,"

> And heavily from woe to woe tell o'er
> The sad account of fore-bemoaned moan.

At times we feel that we are within a measurable distance of bathos :

> Or shall we play the wantons with our woes,
> And make some pretty match with shedding tears ?
> As thus, to drop them still upon one place,
> Till they have fretted us a pair of graves
> Within the earth ; and, therein laid,—there lies
> Two kinsmen digg'd their graves with weeping eyes.
> (Act III, Sc. iii, l. 164.)

At other times we are almost angered by his insistence on finding thorns to wear in his martyr's crown ; as for example in Act V, Sc. i, when he is taking leave of the Queen on his way to the Tower. He himself has said (l. 37) :

> Good sometime queen, prepare thee hence for France ;
> Think I am dead, and that even here thou takest,
> As from my death-bed, thy last living leave.
> In winter's tedious nights sit by the fire
> With good old folks, and let them tell thee tales
> Of woeful ages long ago betid ;
> And ere thou bid good-night, to quit their griefs,
> Tell thou the lamentable tale of me,
> And send the hearers weeping to their beds.

Yet, when (l. 54) Northumberland informs him that his own wish is to be fulfilled and that, by Bolingbroke's orders, the Queen is to go to France, he breaks out into a passionate protest against the monstrous cruelty of separating husband and wife :

> Doubly divorced ! Bad men, you violate
> A twofold marriage ; 'twixt my crown and me,
> And then betwixt me and my married wife.

And the tearful parting that ensues leaves us cold, because we know that Richard had never had the smallest affection for his wife.

But, on the whole, Shakespeare, by the sheer spell of language succeeds in making us accept Richard as a pathetic figure, in spite of his weakness, egotism, and self-deception. And that, no doubt, was what he intended to do. If he is not afraid of emphasising the weakness, I think it is partly because he recognised that weakness is inseparable from self-pity, and partly because he himself felt for it nothing but compassion. He was, however, quite aware of the contempt which would mingle with the pity of other and harder hearts, and, by way of compensation for his long tameness, Richard is allowed to die like a lion. No doubt, in his conception of the fallen king, Shakespeare was influenced by the popular legend which forgot all the past and canonised the victim's bones. In the great abdication scene (Act IV, Sc. i) in spite of the mirror episode, Richard rises to the height of tragic dignity. But, if we can escape from the magic of the words, we realise all the time that he is not the stuff out of which Tragedy can properly be made. He is fallen power, not fallen greatness. The test of greatness in calamity is whether a man does, or does not, discover his own soul. Richard does not discover his soul; he only discovers the iniquity of his former subjects, and poses to himself as a martyr. He comes nearest to greatness, when he says in the abdication scene (Act IV, Sc. i, l. 228):

Must I do so ? and must I ravel out
My weaved-up folly ? Gentle Northumberland,
If thy offences were upon record,
Would it not shame thee in so fair a troop
To read a lecture of them ?

Or when, as a prisoner in Pontefract castle, he hears music and comments (Act V, Sc. v, l. 44) :

So is it in the music of men's lives.
And here have I the daintiness of ear
To check time broke in a disorder'd string ;
But for the concord of my state and time
Had not an ear to hear my true time broke.

But nothing that he ever says can compare for pathos and poignancy with the self-knowledge of Lear's " You must bear with me. Pray you now, forget and forgive : I am old and foolish " (*King Lear*, Act IV, Sc. vii, l. 82).

If we make this comparison, it is because in *Richard II* Shakespeare was for the first time handling a theme out of which in his maturity he created the greatest of all plays—the punishment of a wilful and arbitrary waywardness that will not brook advice, and the desolation which a sense of ingratitude can cause in the human heart. It is interesting therefore to note how readily Shakespeare's sympathy flows out to the dethroned King. In the groom of Act V, Sc. v, we seem to see in embryo the Fool of King Lear, and Aumerle is an unworthy prototype of Kent. The difference between Shakespeare at twenty-nine and Shakespeare at the height

of his powers may be measured by putting two passages side by side:

RICH. For God's sake, let us sit upon the ground
And tell sad stories of the death of kings:
How some have been deposed; some slain in war;
Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed;
Some poison'd by their wives; some sleeping kill'd;
All murder'd.

(Act III, Sc. ii, l. 155.)

LEAR. Come, let's away to prison:
We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage:
When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down
And ask of thee forgiveness: so we'll live,
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
At gilded butterflies; and hear poor rogues
Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too,
Who loses and who wins, who's in, who's out;
And take upon's the mystery of things,
As if we were God's spies.

(Act V, Sc. iii, l. 8.)

The one is great poetry, the other is also great Tragedy.

§ 3. OTHER CHARACTERS

Of the other *dramatis personæ* none stands out with any very clearly marked personality, probably because in this play Shakespeare was more concerned with poetry than with character; and, with the exception of the Bishop of Carlisle, who is an out-and-out supporter of the Divine Right of Kings, the conduct of nearly all is at times ambiguous. Aumerle is an almost incomprehensible mixture of

arrogance, loyalty, and perfidy. Bolingbroke is the man of mystery, intriguing, secretive, suave, but sometimes with an acid touch, as when (in Act IV, Sc. i, l. 316) he sends Richard to the Tower. We learn more about him from others than we do from his own lips. He says practically nothing that is self-revealing, but it is evident that Shakespeare did not like him.

Gaunt is not much more than a figure-head, the old and weary Titan, who plays the prophet on his death-bed. York is probably meant to be what Bolingbroke calls him (Act V, Sc. iii, l. 61), a " sheer, immaculate and silver fountain " of honour ; but he is not very convincing. Placed in a difficult position, he pays himself with words, talks resolutely but acts feebly. After denouncing the treason of Bolingbroke (Act II, Sc. iii, l. 86) he invites the traitor to stay for the night at Berkeley castle, and the next day accompanies him to Wales. Protesting all the while, he takes a hand in all the moves which lead to the deposition of Richard. When the King has to be bullied, Northumberland does the bullying, but when persuasion is required, York does the persuading ; and it is he who finally proclaims the usurper king in Act IV, Sc. i, l. 111. After so much adaptability toward his nephew, we are surprised (in Act V, Sc. iii) at this sudden resolve to play the Roman father to his own son, and not merely to denounce him to the new king but to plead against forgiveness. The kneeling match in this scene is one of the least happy of Shakespeare's dramatic inventions. No doubt York did not wish to be

taken too literally. The Duchess says as much, and we remember Gaunt's words in Act I, Sc. iii, l. 241 :

> A partial slander sought I to avoid,
> And in the sentence my own life destroy'd.
> Alas, I look'd when some of you should say,
> I was too strict to make mine own away.

But the game, if game it were, was a dangerous one, and York's behaviour on this occasion wins neither our sympathy nor our respect.

Mowbray is merely a stage figure, and we learn nothing really about him ; but we observe in connection with him a certain carelessness of which Shakespeare was always capable in the handling of his material. There was time in history for the exiled nobleman to fight " many a time in glorious Christian field against black pagans, Turks and Saracens," and then to retire to Italy and die at Venice (Act IV, Sc. i, l. 92) ; but there is none in the play, where events, actually separated by long intervals of time, are made to follow each other in quick succession.

Northumberland is just the " haughty and cruel man " of Richard's description, and the young Percy is quite colourless. He has nothing in him yet of the Hotspur of *Henry IV*, who is, perhaps, the most attractive of all Shakespeare's historical creations.

For all these reasons we do not turn to *Richard II* in order to study Shakespeare's insight into human character. He does succeed in making the play

interesting as drama, but its abiding charm lies in its sustained outbursts of splendid poetry. Within six years Shakespeare was writing the first part of *King Henry IV*, and in that brief space he had learnt how to make of history not merely poetry but life.

III

FALSTAFF

III

FALSTAFF

One of the strangest features of modern Shakespearean criticism has been the apotheosis of Falstaff. "The fellow with the great belly" has become an intellectual giant with a profound philosophy of life; his rejection is an unforgivable blot on the character of Henry V, and, incidentally, on the judgment and good taste of Shakespeare himself; and, finally, he dies of a broken heart, a wronged and tragic figure. It is true that *The Merry Wives of Windsor* stands horribly in the way of any sentimental regard for the hero. But the apologists of Falstaff have a short way with *The Merry Wives of Windsor.* Shakespeare of course wrote it, but when he wrote it, he was not Shakespeare. We must therefore ignore it, forget it, scrap it. "The real Falstaff," Professor A. C. Bradley tells us (and he is supported by Sir W. Raleigh), "is to be found alive in the two parts of *Henry IV*, dead in *Henry V*, and nowhere else." That is to say, "the real Falstaff" was something greater than Shakespeare's Falstaff, and, in spite of Shakespeare, his greatness can be discovered in Shakespeare's own works.

Now we shall readily admit that the obnoxious play was written in great haste (tradition says in a fortnight), that in it Shakespeare seldom reaches his

highest level of invention, and that at no time did he trouble himself greatly about consistency. But to assume that in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* he was consciously "degrading" (the word is Professor Bradley's) his own creation, working upon an entirely new and erroneous conception of him, and trying to pass off on us this "*ersatz*" Falstaff as the genuine article in the hope that we should not discover the fraud, is a very different matter. For, after all, Falstaff has no independent existence. He is exactly what Shakespeare chose to make him; that, and nothing else. It is astonishing therefore to find so acute and profound a critic as Professor Bradley writing as follows:

"Now it was no more possible for Shakespeare to show his own Falstaff in love than to turn twice two into five. But he could write in haste a comedy or farce, differing from all his other plays in this, that its scene is laid in English middle-class life, and that it is prosaic almost to the end. And among the characters he could introduce a disreputable fat old Knight with attendants, and could call them Falstaff, Bardolph, Pistol, and Nym. And he could represent this knight assailing, for financial purposes, the virtue of two matrons, and in the end baffled, duped, treated like dirty linen, beaten, burnt, pricked, mocked, insulted, and, worst of all, repentant and didactic. It is horrible."[1]

In other words, Shakespeare thought that his "disreputable fat old Knight" of *King Henry IV* would make excellent material for a farce, and he ought not to have thought so.

[1] *Oxford Lectures on Poetry*, pp. 247, 248.

Yet, in reality, there is hardly any of these " horrible " things which has not its counterpart in the " real Falstaff " of *Henry IV* : Falstaff running from Gadshill, " larding the lean earth " and " roaring " (I, Act II, Sc. ii) ; Falstaff " assailing, for financial purposes, the virtue of a matron " (II, Act II, Sc. i) ; Falstaff " beaten " by the Prince for " liking his father to a singing man of Windsor " (*ibid.*) ; Falstaff " in his true colours," the " withered elder " with Doll Tearsheet on his knees and " his poll clawed like a parrot " (II, Act II, Sc. iv, l. 282) ; Falstaff stabbing the dead body of Hotspur, also " for financial purposes " (I, Act V, Sc. iv, l. 130) ; Falstaff duped from the beginning to the end of the play by his own excessive vanity—is there anything in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* more degrading ? The truth is that if we are to accept Professor Bradley's view of Falstaff, we must scrap, not only *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, but also a great part of *King Henry IV*. The legend can only be maintained by ignoring the text of the two earlier plays. Let us then consider what Shakespeare actually tells us about this, his great creation, remembering always that he is the one and only authority for the life and character of Falstaff.

When we are first introduced to him (in " an apartment of the Prince's, in London ") he is " a gentleman of the shade," " a minion of the moon " ; that is to say, he lives by taking purses, and makes no bones about it. " Why, Hal," he says to the Prince (I, Act I, Sc. ii, l. 116), " 'tis my vocation, Hal ; 'tis no sin for a man to labour in his vocation." Though we

cannot rely on the accuracy of his memory for dates, we infer that he has been labouring in this vocation for a considerable period of years; for he says of Poins, who is an active member of the gang, "I have forsworn his company hourly any time this two and twenty years, and yet I am bewitched with the rogue's company" (I, Act II, Sc. ii, l. 16). "Pilgrims going to Canterbury with rich offerings, and traders riding to London with fat purses" (I, Act I, Sc. ii, l. 140) provide the booty. His headquarters are at the Boar's Head tavern in Eastcheap, where he preys on the hostess and where he has surrounded himself with a following of cowardly, but amusing, bullies and ruffians. He is, as we should say, "well known to the police," but the Prince's protection makes him safe from the arm of the law, until the audacious robbery on Gadshill of money that was "going to the King's Exchequer," brings him into imminent danger, and a warrant is out for his arrest. Falstaff, so far as that is possible, is seriously alarmed.

FAL. Bardolph, am I not fallen away vilely since this last action? do I not bate? do I not dwindle? Why, my skin hangs about me like an old lady's loose gown; I am withered like an old apple-john. Well, I'll repent, and that suddenly, while I am in some liking; I shall be out of heart shortly, and then I shall have no strength to repent.

(I, Act III, Sc. iii, l. 1.)

The outbreak of civil war eases the situation. The stolen money is paid back, the Prince is reconciled to his father and procures for his "sweet beef" "a

charge of foot" and a field for fresh adventures (I, Act III, Sc. iii, l. 209).

The charge of foot has led some writers to debate whether Falstaff is essentially a brave man or a coward; but any such discussion is fruitless. We might as well ask whether Puck has, or has not, a conscience. Men of Falstaff's bulk are automatically ruled out of the ranks of fighters, and only two ways of dealing with emergencies are within his compass, bluff, and "discretion," which he considers "the better part of valour." He bluffs the travellers out of their money on Gadshill.

> Strike; down with them; cut the villains' throats: ah! whoreson caterpillars! bacon-fed knaves! they hate us youth: down with them; fleece them.
>
> (I, Act II, Sc. ii, l. 87.)

He bluffs Colevile of the dale into surrender (II, Act IV, Sc. iii, l. 1); when Douglas attacks him at Shrewsbury, he uses "discretion," falls down and shams dead. But, of course, Shakespeare never meant us to take Falstaff seriously. He was created to be enjoyed, not to be judged. When he comes on to the stage, the Ten Commandments fly out of the window, and all moral standards are in abeyance. If Falstaff is less popular with women than with men, the reason, I believe, is that they are less willing to suspend their moral judgments. Some of his wit is cheap enough, and some of the mirth has too much mud in it to be very entertaining now. But, at their best, his humour and his gay effrontery are irresistible.

I do here walk before thee like a sow that hath overwhelmed all her litter but one.

(II, Act I, Sc. ii, l. 12.)

An I have not forgotten what the inside of a church is made of, I am a peppercorn, a brewer's horse: the inside of a church! Company, villainous company hath been the spoil of me.

(I, Act III, Sc. iii, l. 8.)

My lord, I was born about three of the clock in the afternoon, with a white head and something a round belly. For my voice, I have lost it with halloing and singing of anthems.

(II, Act I, Sc. ii, l. 210.)

We may have grown more squeamish than the Elizabethans, but we are not yet minor prophets, and for three such utterances, yea for four, we are willing to forget a multitude of iniquities.

But although we shall not, if we are wise, take Falstaff too seriously, weigh his virtues and vices in the balance, or judge him by ordinary standards, there is one trait in his character which has a direct bearing on the development of the story, and which cannot, therefore, be left out of account. He is excessively vain. It is true that he can make excellent fun of his own corpulence, but he does not like to be reproached with it seriously by others. When, for example, Bardolph says to him (I, Act III, Sc. iii, l. 24): "Why, you are so fat, Sir John, that you must needs be out of all compass, out of all reasonable compass, Sir John," he retorts, with some heat, "Do thou amend thy face, and I'll amend my life."

Nor does he like to be reminded that he is growing old. There is an incident, not acted on the stage, but alluded to by the Drawers at the Boar's Head, which is very much to the point. Supper is being prepared for Falstaff and Doll Tearsheet.

First Drawer. What the devil hast thou brought there ? apple-johns ? thou knowest Sir John cannot endure an apple-john.

Second Drawer. Mass, thou sayest true. The prince once set a dish of apple-johns before him, and told him there were five more Sir Johns ; and, putting off his hat, said : ' I will now take my leave of these six dry, round, old, withered knights.' It angered him to the heart : but he hath forgot that.

(II, Act II, Sc. iv, l. 1.)

Mere touchiness of this kind is harmless enough, but Falstaff's vanity goes much deeper, and leads him to an exaggerated idea of his own powers of fascination and a wholly erroneous belief in his ascendency over the young Prince. Humour and canary sack in Falstaff's " philosophy of life " are the only things that count and, therefore, the only things which he takes at all seriously. There is method in his humour : " O, it is much that a lie with a slight oath and a jest with a sad brow will do with a fellow that never had the ache in his shoulders ! O, you shall see him [the Prince] laugh till his face is like a wet cloak ill laid up ! " (II, Act V, Sc. i, l. 91). And, because the Prince laughs, Falstaff believes that he has him under his thumb. He can imagine no rival influence more dangerous than that of Poins, of whom he is furiously jealous, and whom he tries to discredit. " I commend

me to thee," he writes to the Prince (II, Act II, Sc. ii, l. 136), " I commend thee, and I leave thee. Be not too familiar with Poins ; for he misuses thy favours so much, that he swears thou art to marry his sister Nell." Falstaff thinks of himself as the wise old pike among the young dace (II, Act III, Sc. ii, l. 356), but he is never really the sagacious fellow that he seems to himself (and, it must be admitted, to some of his admirers), because his knowledge of the world is confined to the pike and the dace. Any motive, other than that of self-interest, he is incapable of understanding, and, taking nothing seriously himself, he is blind to the obvious fact that the Prince, when once the crown is on his head, will take kingship very seriously indeed. In this matter Falstaff is, from first to last, the dupe of his own vanity, and no warning can undeceive him—not even personal violence. For, on a certain " Wednesday in Wheeson week," the Prince had " broken his head " for liking his father to a singing man of Windsor. And it was no child's play. Mistress Quickly had to wash the broken head, and warn the victim that the prawns, with which he wished to console himself, were " ill for a green wound." Yet to the very end he seriously believes that under Henry V he and his ruffianly companions would be rewarded, and that the laws of England would be "at his commandment." Fatuity could go no further.

For there is never any doubt about the Prince's attitude towards Falstaff. It is sometimes one of sheer contempt, more often of contemptuous amusement, and, on rare occasions, of contemptuous pity.

To test it, we need only take one crucial moment, when Prince Hal finds Falstaff's body on the field of Shrewsbury, and believes him to have died a soldier's death. It is only fair to remember that the audience knows Falstaff to be shamming, and that consequently any great display of emotion would make the Prince appear ridiculous—which is not to be thought of. I quote the valedictory words in full.

> What, old acquaintance ! could not all this flesh
> Keep in a little life ? Poor Jack, farewell !
> I could have better spared a better man :
> O, I should have a heavy miss of thee,
> If I were much in love with vanity !
> Death hath not struck so fat a deer to-day,
> Though many dearer, in this bloody fray.
> Embowell'd will I see thee by and by :
> Till then in blood by noble Percy lie.
> (I, Act V, Sc. iv, l. 101.)

When we have made all due allowances for dramatic exigencies, is there anything in these words which reveals a trace of real feeling ? The tone is as cold as an icicle. " Old acquaintance," " If I were much in love with vanity," the pun on the " fat deer "—a man might speak more feelingly about a friend's dead dog. And Falstaff heard it all : and he failed to notice its significance, because, with all his bonhomie, friendship was outside his ken. We may believe with Mistress Quickly, if we like, that the King killed his heart (*Henry V*, Act II, Sc. i, l. 92), but, if so, it was disappointed hopes, not wounded affection which dealt the fatal blow. If Falstaff had had a grain of sagacity, he would have perceived

that, if the Prince could part from him so easily, the King might well find it convenient to dispense with his company.

But, if we are not intended to take Falstaff seriously (and assuredly we are not), we are entitled to ask why, at the close of the play, Shakespeare himself should, to all appearance, have joined the ranks of the moralists. The last scene of Part II is the crux of *Henry IV*. From the first, of course, it was inevitable that the " old acquaintance " of Prince Hal would be repudiated by King Henry V. The rejection was foreordained by history, and Shakespeare is at pains to warn us of what must eventually happen, when he puts into the Prince's mouth the notorious soliloquy of Part I, Act I, Sc. ii, l. 219.

> I know you all, and will a while uphold
> The unyoked humour of your idleness :
> Yet herein will I imitate the sun,
> Who doth permit the base contagious clouds
> To smother up his beauty from the world,
> That, when he please again to be himself,
> Being wanted, he may be more wonder'd at,
> By breaking through the foul and ugly mists
> Of vapours that did seem to strangle him.
>
> . . . . .
>
> So, when this loose behaviour I throw off
> And pay the debt I never promised,
> By how much better than my word I am,
> By so much shall I falsify men's hopes ;
> And like bright metal on a sullen ground,
> My reformation, glittering o'er my fault,
> Shall show more goodly and attract more eyes
> Than that which hath no foil to set it off.

After this we cannot charge Shakespeare with springing a surprise on us. The only question is whether he has handled the rejection scene with his usual skill. As a matter of fact, we are left in some doubt whether we are intended to admire the sun, or to sympathise with the base contagious clouds.

On receiving news of the old King's death, Falstaff has hurried to London from Gloucestershire, not, we are bound to admit, from any feelings of love or loyalty, but in order to make sure of the lion's share of the booty. "Let us take any man's horses," he cries; "the laws of England are at my commandment. Blessed are they that have been my friends; and woe to my lord chief justice!" (II, Act V, Sc. iii, l. 144). Consequently, when, in the most solemn hour of his life, the newly crowned and anointed King comes out of the Abbey, he is hailed by his former disreputable acquaintance with shouts of

FAL. God save thy grace, King Hal! my royal Hal!

PIST. The heavens thee guard and keep, most royal imp of fame!

FAL. God save thee, my sweet boy!

(II, Act V, Sc. v, l. 43.)

If we are fair, we shall admit that this was rather a trying moment for the young King. He turns to the lord chief justice and says:

My lord chief justice, speak to that vain man.

The "vain man," however, does not take the hint and continues to cry, "My king! my Jove! I speak

to thee, my heart!" Henry then turns upon him with cold anger.

I know thee not, old man: fall to thy prayers;
How ill white hairs become a fool and jester!
I have long dream'd of such a kind of man,
So surfeit-swell'd, so old, and so profane;
But, being awaked, I do despise my dream.
Make less thy body hence, and more thy grace;
Leave gormandizing; know the grave doth gape
For thee thrice wider than for other men.

The Prince, we may notice in passing, has said all these things to Falstaff before, but he has said them in jest. He continues:

Reply not to me with a fool-born jest:
Presume not that I am the thing I was;
For God doth know, so shall the world perceive,
That I have turn'd away my former self;
So will I those that kept me company.
When thou dost hear I am as I have been,
Approach me, and thou shalt be as thou wast,
The tutor and the feeder of my riots:
Till then, I banish thee, on pain of death,
As I have done the rest of my misleaders,
Not to come near our person by ten mile.
For competence of life I will allow you,
That lack of means enforce you not to evil:
And, as we hear you do reform yourselves,
We will, according to your strengths and qualities,
Give you advancement. Be it your charge, my lord,
To see perform'd the tenour of our word.
(II, Act V, Sc. v, l. 51.)

We grant great provocation, we grant a difficult situation for any one who valued dignity, and still we rub our eyes. Why does Shakespeare suddenly hark back to the tradition which made Falstaff the corruptor of the Prince? Has he forgotten the soliloquy (quoted above) of Part I? For that soliloquy and this speech are in flat contradiction. There never was any waking from a "dream." Prince Hal had always been very wide-awake—much wider awake than Falstaff. Nor had he ever allowed anybody either to lead or to mislead him. From the first he had followed a deliberate, though not very engaging policy, and the effect of his emergence from the clouds had been nicely calculated. Yet the effect of this speech of emergence on the ordinary reader or spectator is a bad effect—the effect of hypocrisy. It is incredible, however, that Shakespeare really intended to present the young King, whom he had nursed so carefully as the future hero of Agincourt, in the odious rôle of hypocrite; and we can hardly escape the conclusion that on this occasion too the dramatist has nodded. He was always capable of this kind of carelessness, when he was tired, or pressed for time, and his company was clamouring for the completion of a play.

But if we "weed our judgements" of the opinion that Falstaff was ever meant to enlist our sympathy, and examine this scene a little more closely, we shall find, I think, that Shakespeare has not nodded so badly as some critics assume. Like the curate's egg, the offensive speech is only bad in parts. With a few omissions, it would almost cease to offend at all.

I know thee not, old man;
Reply not to me with a fool-born jest;
Presume not that I am the thing I was;
For God doth know, so shall the world perceive,
That I have turn'd away my former self;
So will I those that kept me company.
When thou dost hear I am as I have been,
Approach me and thou shalt be as thou wast.
Till then, I banish thee, on pain of death,
Not to come near our person by ten mile.
For competence of life I will allow you,
That lack of means enforce you not to evil:
And, as we hear you do reform yourselves,
We will, according to your strengths and qualities,
Give you advancement. Be it your charge, my lord,
To see perform'd the tenour of our word.

This would at least have been consistent with the Prince's character as he appears in the rest of the play (and especially in the soliloquy), and, though hard and rather too much in the manner of Prince John, might, under the circumstances, have been forgiven. But the fact remains that the speech was not so written, and the actual wording of it does not help us to like King Henry V.

The rest of the scene, till Falstaff's exit (l. 102), is rather ambiguous, and the effect it produces on us depends largely on the way in which it is acted. Falstaff turns to Shallow and says, "Master Shallow, I owe you a thousand pound." It would be interesting to know whether Shakespeare's Falstaff said this like a Stoic accepting the facts of life, or with an inward chuckle, delighted to think that he had at all events taken a thousand pounds off the foolish Justice.

Further, whether in saying " I shall be sent for soon at night," he was clutching desperately at a straw, or merely displaying the imperturbable self-confidence which was natural to him. And, finally, whether he left the stage with a bowed head, as most of his modern impersonators seem to do, or jauntily and unabashed.

It is difficult to believe that Shakespeare really intended to invest his fat knight with any element of pathos. The Elizabethans were not sentimental about fat men, and a tragic Falstaff would have been a violation of stage tradition. Moreover, the mere fact that Justice Shallow is swept off to the Fleet with his debtor, as one of the " gang," seems to suggest that this episode was meant to be taken hilariously.

Two other considerations lend colour to this interpretation.

(1) When Shakespeare gave Falstaff his own wit and, on occasions, his wisdom, perhaps he did not realise, being a modest man, the full value of the gift. Probably he was more permanently conscious of the knavery of his fat knight than we are, and slightly underestimated the attractive quality of his humour. In that case he would not have thought that he was outraging anybody's feelings by submitting Falstaff to a rebuff, which History demanded, and which was never intended to be a knock-out blow.

For (2) when he wrote this scene, Shakespeare meant to revive Falstaff in *King Henry V.* He tells us so plainly in the Epilogue which follows immediately after the rejection.

One word more, I beseech you. If you be not too much cloyed with fat meat, our humble author will continue the story, with Sir John in it, and make you merry with fair Katharine of France : where, for any thing I know, Falstaff shall die of a sweat, unless already a' be killed with your hard opinions.

And how could Falstaff have appeared in France, unless he had been at least partially restored to favour ? The King's speech leaves a loop-hole for such a restoration. " Reformation " is to be rewarded by " advancement," and it was well within Falstaff's powers to enact a scene of penitence which would have procured him " a charge of foot," or some other post in which he might have made us merry.

But Shakespeare changed his mind. He was bound to change his mind, if he wished the hero of Agincourt to dominate the stage. The theme of *King Henry V* did not allow of two lions, of whom Falstaff was certain to prove the more popular. So, for us, the rejection scene remains the knock-out blow, and, however lightly it may be acted, it does not wholly satisfy. For the knaves of drama or fiction, who have convulsed us with laughter, we demand, at the end, not justice, but an amnesty ; and we do not like to part with Falstaff in the Fleet, or with Pecksniff down at heels and in sordid poverty. Perhaps we have become over-sensitive ; but, the Second Part of *Henry IV*, having in effect, though not in theory, become the play of *Falstaff*, the rejection scene does assume for us a much greater importance than it was probably ever intended to

possess. And, though we can defend it, we do not enjoy it.

Since Falstaff could not be taken to France, he had to die, and Shakespeare dispatches him in a little scene of marvellous realism (*Henry V*, Act II, Sc. iii, l. 12). We may note that he dies in a tavern in London, which is, presumably, the old Boar's Head, so that he has not been obliged to change his haunts.

HOSTESS. . . . a' parted even just between twelve and one, even at the turning o' the tide: for after I saw him fumble with the sheets, and play with flowers, and smile upon his fingers' ends, I knew there was but one way; for his nose was as sharp as a pen and a' babbled of green fields.[1] 'How now, Sir John!' quoth I: 'what, man! be o' good cheer.' So a' cried out 'God, God, God!' three or four times. Now I, to comfort him, bid him a' should not think of God; I hoped there was no need to trouble himself with any such thoughts yet. So a' bade me lay more clothes on his feet: I put my hand into the bed and felt them, and they were as cold as any stone; then I felt to his knees, and they were as cold as any stone, and so upward and upward, and all was as cold as any stone.

NYM. They say he cried out of sack.

HOSTESS. Ay, that a' did.

BARD. And of women.

But the Hostess, whose personal reputation is involved, denies this hotly. The boy, however, corrects her.

[1] Theobald's conjecture for "a Table of greene fields."

Boy. Yes, that a' did ; and said they were devils incarnate.

Hostess. A' could never abide carnation ; 'twas a colour he never liked.

Boy. A' said once, the devil would have him about women.

Hostess. A' did in some sort, indeed, handle [i.e. talk about] women ; but then he was rheumatic, and talked of the whore of Babylon.

Boy. Do you not remember, a' saw a flea stick upon Bardolph's nose, and a' said it was a black soul burning in hell-fire ?

Bard. Well, the fuel is gone that maintained that fire : that's all the riches I got in his service.

(*Henry V*, Act II, Sc. iii, l. 12.)

" So a' cried out ' God, God, God ! ' three or four times. Now I, to comfort him, bid him a' should not think of God "—It is very true to life, but it is very grim.

IV

HENRY V

IV

HENRY V

King Henry V presents us with a difficulty which we do not, I think, experience in any of the other plays ; and it is this : what exactly was Shakespeare's own attitude towards the victor of Agincourt ? Did he intend us to enjoy and admire him whole-heartedly, to approve his ambitions and sympathise with his sense of the burden of kingship, or did he mean to show us, behind the dazzling glory of the conqueror, a real, and rather ugly, hardness of heart, and a great capacity for self-deception ? Was he, in short, creating or criticising a popular hero ? There are certainly passages in the play which might lend support to the second of these alternatives.

As a candidate for our sympathies, King Henry is heavily handicapped by the fact that he was once Prince Hal, or, perhaps, it would be fairer to say that Prince Hal was handicapped by the fact that he was destined to become King Henry, and was therefore condemned to carry on his back a label (the soliloquy of *Henry IV, Part I*, Act I, Sc. ii), which makes his high spirits a condescension and his good-fellowship something of an hypocrisy. There were two legends about Henry : the legend of the unruly Prince misled by bad companions, and the legend of the strong, sagacious, and heroic King. Shakespeare accepted

them both, but he did not really reconcile them. The soliloquy converts the wild oats into a profitable and carefully cultivated crop, and we can no longer think of them as wild. Falstaff, indeed, may allude to the " box o' the ear " which the Prince inflicted on the Lord Chief Justice, and Henry may call Falstaff the " tutor of his riots," but neither carries conviction. For the Prince whom we are shown on the stage is never allowed to be the mad-cap of tradition. He is often in the Boar's Head tavern, but never of it. He watches the excesses of the fat knight with a detached and contemptuous amusement, but he never shares them. If he connives at highway robbery, it is only in order to play a trick on Falstaff. He is never permitted to say or do anything which would seriously compromise his dignity, and even if Falstaff's head is to be broken, the breaking has to be done off the stage. He is always master of himself, and his highest spirits (and they are seldom very high) are under perfect control.

The fact that Shakespeare, although he accepted in theory the tradition of a disreputable past, seems always to be trying to escape from it, and not always with a very certain touch, is, I think, significant; for it goes to show that, when he wrote *Henry IV*, he had already fixed the lines which *Henry V* was to follow; that he was determined to keep Prince Hal's record as clear as tradition would allow, and at all costs to preserve his dignity.

This brings us back to the question with which we started; namely, what exactly was Shakespeare's

own attitude towards Henry V ? The surest test is the effect which, when it is acted, the play produces on the audience. And, on the stage, Henry V does come through as an heroic figure who carries us along with him, and who, if he does not kindle our sympathies to any great degree of warmth, certainly does not alienate them. This seems to be conclusive on one point which might otherwise, conceivably, have remained doubtful: Shakespeare himself did regard Henry V as a great and heroic figure. For not even Shakespeare, for purely stage purposes, could have palmed off on us as heroic a character for whom in his private thoughts he had little or no regard.

We may therefore assume that Shakespeare accepted Henry as a national hero ; and we may suppose that in *Henry V* he intended to give us a kind of pageant of national glory with the victor of Agincourt as its central figure. It is true that Agincourt was ancient history even in Shakespeare's day, but the defeat of the Spanish Armada was only eleven years old, and it had roused Englishmen of all classes to a new and exuberant sense of national greatness. Shakespeare himself was intensely patriotic. The ringing lines, which he puts into the mouth of Gaunt in *Richard II*, reveal how he felt about England. For, more perhaps than any other writer of genius, he could understand and share the feelings of the man in the street ; and never in any mood does he reflect the attitude of mind which we are accustomed to call high-brow.

If then we feel justified in thinking of this play as

pageant in its conception rather than as drama, we should expect that Shakespeare would treat his hero more objectively than is his way with his other great creations; would, as it were, visualise him from the point of view of the pit, saying and doing the conventionally royal and courageous things. And, if that is so, we shall not try to discover in Henry anything very subtle or complex, or analyse his motives, as we feel impelled to do with Othello, or Macbeth, or Hamlet. We shall, in fact, accept him at his face value, as Shakespeare seems, on the whole, to have accepted him: an heroic specimen of the type called "soldier king."

It is quite in keeping with this theory of national pageant, that several of the subordinate characters are types rather than individuals. The Dauphin represents the traditionally vainglorious Frenchman. Jamy and Macmorris are conventional portraits of Scotchman and Irishman. Fluellen, it is true, except for his local patriotism, has little about him that is distinctively Welsh, and in his mental make-up seems almost prophetic of the War Office. Possibly Shakespeare drew him from some Anglicised Welshman of his acquaintance. But with Bates and Williams "Old Bill" steps for the first time on to the stage, as the type of the English common soldier. Nym, Bardolph, and the boy are old friends, but, divorced from their master, they are but shadows of their former selves. Pistol has to do the comic relief which had originally been intended for Falstaff, and he is an indifferent substitute. *Henry V* is a play of only one great part, and nobody is allowed to

compete seriously for our interest with the protagonist.

But it is possible to admire with the head and not with the heart, and it is difficult to escape a feeling that, though Shakespeare admired his hero, he did not like him, or, at any rate, that he did not like him very much. He never seems really to identify himself with the part, and, though there are many memorable speeches in the play, the King never says any of those deep and revealing things which we associate with Shakespeare's other great creations. Indeed, from the first Henry is never presented to us as a really lovable character. He is too cold-blooded to be charming, and, even as a soldier, brave, generous, and modest about himself, he is infinitely less attractive than Hotspur. A reason for such a lack of personal sympathy is not far to seek. Shakespeare admired statesmanship and efficiency; he undoubtedly admired Elizabeth; but he seems to have associated them with a certain hardness, even ruthlessness, which was alien to his own nature. Nor did he fail to recognise that forceful and ambitious people, like Henry, are seldom able to live up to their own standards of greatness without the aid of some self-deception; and self-deception, though it is not incompatible with great qualities, is not the most endearing of human frailties. There are certainly passages in this play which seem to be inspired by criticism rather than by sympathy.

> Not to-day, O Lord,
> O, not to-day, think not upon the fault
> My father made in compassing the crown!

I Richard's body have interred new ;
And on it have bestow'd more contrite tears
Than from it issued forced drops of blood :
Five hundred poor I have in yearly pay,
Who twice a-day their wither'd hands hold up
Toward heaven, to pardon blood ; and I have built
Two chantries, where the sad and solemn priests
Sing still for Richard's soul. More will I do ;
Though all that I can do is nothing worth,
Since that my penitence comes after all,
Imploring pardon.

(Act IV, Sc. i, l. 309.)

The master of irony could not possibly have missed the irony implicit in this prayer. He allows even Claudius to see deeper :

May one be pardon'd and retain the offence ?
In the corrupted currents of this world
Offence's gilded hand may shove by justice,
And oft 'tis seen the wicked prize itself
Buys out the law : but 'tis not so above ;
There is no shuffling.

(*Hamlet*, Act III, Sc. iii, l. 56.)

Again, in Act IV, Sc. i, l. 253, Henry indulges in a long soliloquy on the hardship of being a king :

What infinite heart's-ease
Must kings neglect, that private men enjoy !
And what have kings, that privates have not too,
Save ceremony, save general ceremony ?
And what art thou, thou idol ceremony ?

. . . . .

Canst thou, when thou command'st the beggar's knee,
Command the health of it ? No, thou proud dream,
That play'st so subtly with a king's repose ;

I am a king that find thee, and I know
'Tis not the balm, the sceptre and the ball,
The sword, the mace, the crown imperial,

. . . . .

No, not all these, thrice-gorgeous ceremony,
Not all these, laid in bed majestical,
Can sleep so soundly as the wretched slave,
Who with a body fill'd and vacant mind
Gets him to rest, cramm'd with distressful bread;
Never sees horrid night, the child of hell,
But, like a lackey, from the rise to set
Sweats in the eye of Phœbus, and all night
Sleeps in Elysium.

This is a moving picture of the burden that is attached to high office and great responsibility; but we are aware, all the time, that Henry would not part with his burden for fifty Elysiums; that he does, in fact, enjoy every minute of it, and that the pity which he is able to lavish on himself forms an integral part of his enjoyment.

And once more, there is an obvious pose in the attitude which Henry adopts in Act V, Sc. ii, when he is wooing Katharine of France: that, namely, of a plain, blunt soldier, unskilled in the use of words or the arts of peace:

Marry, if you would put me to verses or to dance for your sake, Kate, why you undid me. . . . If I could win a lady at leap-frog, or by vaulting into my saddle with my armour on my back, under the correction of bragging be it spoken, I should quickly leap into a wife. . . . But before God, Kate, I cannot look greenly nor gasp out my eloquence, nor I have no cunning in protestation; only downright

oaths, which I never use till urged, nor never break for urging. . . . What! a speaker is but a prater; a rhyme is but a ballad. . . . Take me, take a soldier; take a soldier, take a king.

We remember Henry's many eloquent speeches, his poetic diction, his gift for metaphor and simile; and we smile.

But these are only light shadows, and we may be sure that Shakespeare did not mean them to obscure for us the sun. After all, a little harmless posing, a little naïve self-pity are pardonable in a man who is genuinely brave, and, according to his lights, a just and conscientious ruler. A hero is not less a hero because he has some human foibles.

Much more disconcerting is a criticism, flashed suddenly on the story itself by a common soldier, and giving us a momentary glimpse into problems which that story practically ignores.

Williams. But if the cause be not good, the king himself hath a heavy reckoning to make, when all those legs and arms and heads, chopped off in a battle, shall join together at the latter day and cry all 'We died at such a place'; some swearing, some crying for a surgeon, some upon their wives left poor behind them, some upon the debts they owe, some upon their children rawly left. I am afeard there are few die well that die in a battle; for how can they charitably dispose of any thing, when blood is their argument? Now, if these men do not die well, it will be a black matter for the king that led them to it; whom to disobey were against all proportion of subjection.

(Act IV, Sc. i, l. 140.)

This is said on the eve of the battle of Agincourt, at the moment when we have been keyed up to the highest pitch of expectation; and it is disturbing, because it is not the point of view from which the play is written. If we were to accept it, the glory of Agincourt and of its hero would suffer a sensible diminution. Nor is the criticism ever really answered; for Henry's sophisms are no answer. Bates, however, allows himself to be convinced by them; Williams is silenced, and the story pursues its triumphant course. And this was Shakespeare's way. He does precisely the same thing in the *Merchant of Venice*, when (in Act III, Sc. i, ll. 56, etc., and 125) he allows us for a moment to see the story from Shylock's point of view, and thereby somewhat impairs our enjoyment of its *dénouement*.

As drama, the weak point in *Henry V* is that the real climax, the battle of Agincourt, comes in the fourth and not in the fifth act. As pageant, it suffers from the lack of material resources at the dramatist's disposal for realising his great conception. Shakespeare was fully aware of the audacity of his attempt:

> But pardon, gentles all,
> The flat unraised spirits that have dared
> On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth
> So great an object: can this cockpit hold
> The vasty fields of France? or may we cram
> Within this wooden O the very casques
> That did affright the air at Agincourt?
> (Prologue, l. 8.)

Elaborate stage machinery and hosts of supers formed no part of the Elizabethan theatre. The

only substitute was a chorus ; and the chorus labours hard to kindle our imaginations and fill them with all the pomp and circumstance of war, drums, guns, and trumpets, the spreading sails of mighty navies, the tramp of marching armies. At times the language swells to sheer bombast ; but the prologue to Act IV is a masterpiece of imaginative descriptive writing. For the rest, Shakespeare had to rely on rhetoric. Rhetoric is out of fashion to-day among the educated classes. It has been banished from Parliament ; it hardly survives even in the pulpit ; and we are apt to label it " tub-thumping." But the Elizabethans loved, and Shakespeare excelled in, it. Some of Henry's speeches are incomparable of their kind. There is, for example, the famous " Crispin Crispian " speech ; or take these lines :

> And you, good yeomen,
> Whose limbs were made in England, show us here
> The mettle of your pasture ; let us swear
> That you are worth your breeding ; which I doubt not ;
> For there is none of you so mean and base,
> That hath not noble lustre in your eyes.
> I see you stand like greyhounds in the slips,
> Straining upon the start. The game's afoot :
> Follow your spirit, and upon this charge
> Cry ' God for Harry, England and Saint George ! '
> (Act III, Sc. i, l. 25.)

If we have any smack of youth left in us, we are still swept off our feet by this brave torrent of words.

We may, perhaps, conjecture that Shakespeare had looked forward to writing this play—an heroic

and many-coloured pageant—but that he actually derived less enjoyment from it than he had expected. The difficulties were great, and possibly he was beginning to find it less easy than of old to enter into the Ercles vein. He was on the brink of the tragic period, and was growing more critical of life. Romance no longer stirred in him the "first fine careless rapture" of the early Comedies, and in two years, or less, he would be writing *Hamlet*. The first Act of *Henry V*, apart from the King's reply to the Dauphin's message, is rather laboured. In places Shakespeare is content merely to paraphrase his authority, Holinshed, sometimes with almost incredible baldness; a sure sign that he was not interested. It must be admitted that the Salic Law was not an inspiring theme. The pulse of the drama quickens when we land in France. But even here we are more conscious of effort than is, I believe, the case in any of the other plays. In the repeated and urgent appeals of the chorus to us to use our imagination rather than our eyes, we seem to see the poet struggling with the difficulties of the task he has set himself. Yet, in spite of everything, *Henry V* remains a wonderful *tour de force*, a proof of what genius can accomplish with scanty means. It is less interesting to read, I think, than any other of the best known plays; but it has always been popular on the stage, and still draws crowds to the Old Vic. And that, no doubt, is the test by which Shakespeare meant us to judge it.

V

JAQUES

V

JAQUES

On the stairs of the Memorial Library at Stratford-on-Avon there are seven small windows, representing the "Seven Ages of Man." The baby is a healthy, happy baby, the schoolboy a cheerful, jolly schoolboy, the lover a romantic figure, and the soldier every inch a man. All of which shows that it is possible to read and enjoy Shakespeare without understanding him.

Jaques is a character of Shakespeare's own creation. He does not belong to the story which is dramatised in *As You Like It*, and he takes no part in the development of the plot. Shakespeare was therefore able to do with him exactly as he pleased, and it is particularly interesting to observe how he treats him.

The reason why Jaques came into being is perfectly clear: he is needed as a foil, as a contrast. In a world of convinced optimists like the banished Duke, who finds life in the forest of Arden "more sweet than that of painted pomp" (Act II, Sc. i, l. 2), and of high-spirited lovers, like Orlando and Rosalind, he speaks the language of disillusionment. But, as is befitting in a Comedy, his disillusionment does not go very deep, and the speaker is invariably shown to be talking nonsense; or, to use an expressive schoolboy phrase, he is invariably "scored off."

He is " scored off," rather ponderously, by the Duke Senior in Act II, Sc. vii, ll. 64 *et seq.*; more wittily by Rosalind in Act IV, Sc. i, ll. 1–30; and, and too easily to be convincing, by Orlando in Act III, Sc. ii, l. 303.

JAQ. By my troth, I was seeking for a fool when I found you.
ORL. He is drowned in the brook: look but in, and you shall see him.
JAQ. There I shall see mine own figure.
ORL. Which I take to be either a fool or a cipher.

The dullest schoolboy would not have fallen into so obvious a trap, and Jaques was very far from being dull. There is much internal evidence to show that this play was written at more than the usual speed, and this is one of the places in which haste may have led to carelessness.

And not only is Jaques " scored off " by the other characters in the play, but his cynicism is proved to be ridiculous by the facts of life. In Act II, Sc. vii, ll. 139–66 he has been developing, with much gusto, his theme that " All the world's a stage," on which mankind plays a series of contemptible parts. The baby wails and is sick in its mother's arms; the schoolboy whines, and creeps like snail unwillingly to school; the lover is an idiot with his woeful ballads made to his mistress's eyebrow; the soldier a still greater idiot, risking his life for a bubble; and so on, through the pedantic justice, and the lean and slipper'd pantaloon, till we reach the last stage of all " sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans every thing."

At this moment Orlando re-enters with Adam. Now, Adam is eighty years old (Act II, Sc. iii, l. 71), and ought by rights to be a typical example of the "last stage of all" "sans *teeth*, sans taste," etc. In reality, of course, he is nothing of the kind.

Ad. Though I look old, yet I am strong and lusty ;
For in my youth I never did apply
Hot and rebellious liquors in my blood,
Nor did not with unbashful forehead woo
The means of weakness and debility ;
Therefore my age is as a lusty winter,
Frosty, but kindly.

(Act II, Sc. iii, l. 47.)

The Duke says to Orlando, "Welcome. Set down your venerable burthen" ; and then, with a sly glance at Jaques, adds "and let him *feed*." [1]

We are told one or two things about Jaques in the course of the play. Audrey (Act V, Sc. i, l. 4) calls him "the old gentleman."

Aud. Faith, the priest was good enough, for all the old gentleman's saying.

The Duke tells us (Act II, Sc. vii, l. 65) that Jaques has been "a libertine," and Jaques himself (Act IV, Sc. i, l. 18) informs us that he has been a traveller. Our first introduction to him is at second-hand through the report of the First Lord, who relates how he and "my Lord of Amiens" overheard the soliloquy on the wounded deer.

[1] This was first pointed out to me by the late Mr. R. Whitelaw. It seems entirely in keeping with Shakespeare's love of irony.

'Poor deer,' quoth he, 'thou makest a testament
As worldlings do, giving thy sum of more
To that which had too much': then, being there alone,
Left and abandon'd of his velvet friends;
''Tis right,' quoth he; 'thus misery doth part
The flux of company': anon a careless herd,
Full of the pasture, jumps along by him
And never stays to greet him; 'Ay,' quoth Jaques,
'Sweep on, you fat and greasy citizens;
'Tis just the fashion: wherefore do you look
Upon that poor and broken bankrupt there?'
Thus most invectively he pierceth through
The body of the country, city, court.
(Act II, Sc. i, l. 47.)

And finally he is left "*weeping* and commenting upon the sobbing deer."

This seems a rather more poetical and sentimental Jaques than the one with whom we become familiar in the play, and who, moreover, likes to have an audience for his tirades. Possibly Shakespeare had not determined, at this stage of the play, the exact quality of Jaques' melancholy, or perhaps he was carried by the nature of the incident (as he not infrequently is) out of drama into poetry. At all events, in the rest of the play Jaques generally affects prose; he parodies the lovely little lyric, "Under the greenwood tree":

If it do come to pass
That any man turn ass,
Leaving his wealth and ease
A stubborn will to please,

Ducdame, ducdame, ducdame :
Here shall he see
Gross fools as he,
And if he will come to me.
(Act II, Sc. v, l. 51.)

And he objects to poetical language in others :

ORL. Good-day and happiness, dear Rosalind !
JAQ. Nay, then, God buy you, an you talk in blank verse.
(Act IV, Sc. i, l. 30.)

Nor does he show any feeling for the *dead* deer :

JAQ. Which is he that killed the deer ?
A LORD. Sir, it was I.
JAQ. Let's present him to the Duke, like a Roman conqueror ; and it would do well to set the deer's horns upon his head, for a branch of victory. Have you no song, forester, for this purpose ?
(Act IV, Sc. ii, l. 1.)

To all the dwellers in the forest he is known as " the melancholy Jaques," and he is proud of the title. It is not, as he explains to Rosalind (in Act IV, Sc. i, l. 10), the ordinary kind of melancholy, but something peculiar to himself, " compounded of many simples, extracted from many objects ; and indeed the sundry contemplation of my travels, in which my often rumination wraps me in a most humorous sadness."

It is a self-conscious melancholy. There is no echo in it of Hamlet's cry :

O God ! God !
How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world !

It displays itself in caustic comments on lovers and the voices of singers, in a good-natured interchange of insults with Orlando, and, generally speaking, in a cynical attitude towards life, which finds a zest in its littlenesses and absurdities. Hence his delight in Touchstone, the fool apeing the philosopher :

> A fool, a fool ! I met a fool i' the forest,
> A motley fool ; a miserable world !
> ["A miserable world" is said with immense gusto.]
> . . . . .
> . . . . When I did hear
> The motley fool thus moral on the time,
> My lungs began to crow like chanticleer,
> That fools should be so deep-contemplative ;
> And I did laugh sans intermission
> An hour by his dial.
>
> (Act II, Sc. vii, l. 12.)

This " melancholy " was combined with a dry humour. He answers Orlando's melodramatic " Forbear and eat no more," with " Why, I have eat none yet " (Act II, Sc. vii, l. 88), and, immediately afterwards, to the equally melodramatic

> But forbear, I say :
> He dies that touches any of this fruit
> Till I and my affairs are answered,

he replies in prose :

> An you will not be answered with reason, I must die.

Apt and witty too is his simile of the ark, when the various couples are approaching the trysting place.

There is, sure, another flood toward, and these couples are coming to the ark. Here comes a pair of very strange beasts, which in all tongues are called fools.

(Act V, Sc. iv, l. 35.)

Once only in the excitement of his discovery of " the fool i' the forest," does Jaques claim for himself a more ambitious rôle than that of licensed " grouser."

Invest me in my motley ; give me leave
To speak my mind, and I will through and through
Cleanse the foul body of the infected world,
If they will patiently receive my medicine.

(Act II, Sc. vii, l. 58.)

The idea of Jaques as a minor prophet in motley would certainly have amused any other of his friends and acquaintances; but the Duke, who always remains ducal and has not a light touch, turns on him with an asperity which seems hardly justified by the occasion, and which is in strange contrast with the general tone and temper of the play. In answer to Jaques' " What, for a counter, would I do but good ? " the Duke replies :

Most mischievous foul sin, in chiding sin :
For thou thyself hast been a libertine,
As sensual as the brutish sting itself ;
And all the embossed sores and headed evils,
That thou with license of free foot hast caught,
Wouldst thou disgorge into the general world.

(Act II, Sc. vii, l. 64.)

After this we are not surprised that Jaques has been trying to avoid the Duke " all this day," as being

" too disputable " for his company (Act II, Sc. v, l. 36). He does not defend himself against the charge of having been a rake ; but, when he explains with what kind of " medicine " he is going to " cleanse the foul body of the infected world," we find that he has nothing more drastic in view than to tell city women and men " of basest function " that they dress extravagantly.

In reality Jaques' " melancholy " is more than half a conscious and cultivated pose. When he says to Rosalind, " Why, 'tis good to be sad and say nothing " (Act IV, Sc. i, l. 8), we know that he is describing a felicity to which he has never attained and that his " I'll go sleep, if I can ; if I cannot, I'll rail against all the first-born of Egypt " (Act II, Sc. v, l. 62), and (to Orlando) " Will you sit down with me ? and we two will rail against our mistress the world, and all our misery " (Act III, Sc. ii, l. 294), correspond more closely with his practice. Indeed, what Jaques most dearly loves is to " rail " to an audience, and explain that the world is or ought to be a " miserable " world, and that they are all fools.

But his cynicism is only skin-deep, and it does not survive the test of action. Touchstone has arranged to be married to Audrey by a hedge-priest, Sir Oliver Martext, in an ambiguous manner, which will make the validity of the marriage uncertain. Sir Oliver insists that there must be someone to " give " the woman. Jaques, who has been watching, unseen, steps forward, and says :

Proceed, proceed ; I'll give her.

But, a moment later, better thoughts prevail, and he says, abruptly:

> And will you, being a man of your breeding, be married under a bush like a beggar? Get you to church, and have a good priest that can tell you what marriage is: this fellow will but join you together as they join wainscot; then one of you will prove a shrunk panel, and like green timber warp, warp.
>
> (Act III, Sc. iii, l. 83.)

There is no cynicism here; the Duke Senior could not have spoken better.

And what could be more patriarchal than his final blessing of the people at whom he has been scoffing throughout the play?

> [*To* Duke S.] You to your former honour I bequeath;
> Your patience and your virtue well deserves it:
> [*To* Orl.] You to a love that your true faith doth merit:
> [*To* Ol.] You to your land, and love, and great allies:
> [*To* Sil.] You to a long and well-deserved bed:
> [*To* Touch.] And you to wrangling; for thy loving voyage
> Is but for two months victuall'd.
>
> (Act V, Sc. iv, l. 192.)

Perhaps we ought not to take this too seriously. The conventions require an all-round blessing, and, as there is nobody else on the stage in a position to give it, Jaques is requisitioned for the purpose. He becomes himself again in his refusal to stay and see the pastimes.

To see no pastime I : what you would have
I'll stay to know at your abandon'd cave.
(*Ibid.*, l. 201.)

Equally characteristic is his threat to visit the usurping Duke, who has just abandoned his crown and retired from the world :

JAQ. To him will I : out of these convertites
There is much matter to be heard and learn'd.
(Act V, Sc. iv, l. 190.)

In saying this Jaques is living up to his pose. We doubt if he will carry out his threat, for the Jaques whom we know would find very little pleasure in the society of " convertites," or they in his. Or are we to suppose that Shakespeare is harking back to the Jaques of Act II, Sc. i ?

The words,

So, to your pleasures :
I am for other than for dancing measures,
(Act V, Sc. iv, l. 208.)

seem to strike a more serious note than we are prepared for, and I think we should have been better satisfied, if he had left us with some gibe in the nature of,

I'll go sleep ; if I cannot, I'll rail against all the first-born of Egypt.

Jaques is not one of the characters whom Shakespeare has thought out most deeply. He was needed as a foil, and he is used, as occasion serves, without any great regard for consistency. But he is an arrest-

ing character, partly because he is very much alive, and partly because in him Shakespeare for the first time touches on the problem of disillusionment. To treat it seriously would have been out of place in a Comedy, yet there are moments when he seems on the point of probing a little deeper, and giving us the disillusioned rake, instead of the travelled *poseur*. His sense of comedy restrained him ; the temper of *As You Like It* is not the temper of *Measure for Measure*. But *As You Like It* stands on the borderline of the tragic period, and, perhaps, we may see in the sudden and unexpected outburst of the Duke Senior an indication of the mood which was soon to become the dominant one, and which was to lead the dramatist himself to other than to dancing measures.

VI

MACBETH

VI

MACBETH

§ 1. Macbeth

Though the language is sometimes difficult, *Macbeth* is in many ways the most straightforward of the tragedies. Yet it leaves us with a puzzle. This puzzle, however, lies not so much in the play itself as in our own reactions to it. Macbeth is a murderer, unscrupulous, treacherous, cruel. We are consenting parties to his death ; we could not have been satisfied without it. If there had been any question of sparing him, we should have turned down our thumbs inexorably. Yet at no time do we really hate him, and in the last act he extorts our admiration. Malcolm's contemptuous description, " this dead butcher " (Act V, Sc. viii, l. 69) startles and shocks us. Dead butcher ! Macbeth was something greater than that. Had he been otherwise, the play would have been, not one of the greatest of the tragedies, but only a story of crime, like many another Elizabethan drama.

What is there then in Macbeth which, through all his crimes, keeps alive in us a feeling of respectful awe, and compels our pity, if it does not win our pardon ? There are two obvious answers :

(1) Macbeth feels the horror of Duncan's murder as deeply as we do. His mental anguish in the

performance of the crime forms a bond of sympathy between us.

(2) He is a great poet and speaks a language unsurpassed even in Shakespeare.

But neither singly nor together do these explanations quite cover the ground. For one thing, the murder of Duncan is not the only murder. There are no extenuating circumstances in the butchery of Lady Macduff and her little son. For another, great language would fail to charm, it would even repel us, unless it corresponded with some inner greatness of soul. I think that our rather unwilling respect for Macbeth springs chiefly from the fact that he is never guilty of self-deception. However treacherous his actions may be, in his thoughts he always remains true to himself, never attempts to conceal from himself his own motives or to justify his crimes, and never disparages the moral worth of his victims. To the very end his inner vision remains unclouded, and his verdict on himself is as severely impartial as that of a judge. In other words, he never has the lie in his soul.

Yet it would have been easy for him to make out quite a plausible case for the removal of Duncan. Scotland needed a strong king. Duncan was old, weak, and sentimental. He could not keep his unruly thanes in order nor save his country from the incursions of Norway. There is a touch of contempt even in the loyal Banquo's remark " shut up in measureless content " (Act II, Sc. i, l. 16). Fresh from his double victory, certain that a continuance of this weak reign would only breed new broils which

he would have to quell again, Macbeth might well have said to himself, " I owe it to myself and to my country to make myself king. Duncan has become impossible; he must go: a cruel necessity." Instead, we find him saying:

> Besides, this Duncan
> Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
> So clear in his great office, that his virtues
> Will plead like angels trumpet-tongued against
> The deep damnation of his taking off;
> . . . . .
> . . . I have no spur
> To prick the sides of my intent, but only
> Vaulting ambition which o'erleaps itself
> And falls on the other.
>
> (Act I, Sc. vii, l. 16.)

Again, when he is plotting the murder of Banquo, he says of him:

> Our fears in Banquo
> Stick deep; and in his royalty of nature
> Reigns that which would be fear'd: 'tis much he dares,
> And, to that dauntless temper of his mind,
> He hath a wisdom that doth guide his valour
> To act in safety.
>
> (Act III, Sc. i, l. 49.)

In the last phase of all, when the net is closing round him, he can still see the truth about himself with deadly clearness.

> My way of life
> Is fall'n into the sear, the yellow leaf,
> And that which should accompany old age,
> As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,

I must not look to have ; but, in their stead,
Curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honour, breath,
Which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare not.
(Act V, Sc. iii, l. 22.)

And, when in the final struggle he meets Macduff, his first words are :

Of all men else I have avoided thee :
But get thee back ; my soul is too much charged
With blood of thine already.
(Act V, Sc. viii, l. 4.)

At this point we have to ask ourselves a question. Is it possible that a man who can see so clearly into his own motives should fail to realise the hollowness of his ambition ?

The explanation of this patent difficulty seems to be that Macbeth is not a type, but a rare individual, with great gifts and strange limitations. His character is extremely complex, and therefore full of self-contradictions. He is, for example, both a poet and a man of action. He thinks generously, but acts basely. He combines great courage with what we can only call great cowardice. But among the conflicting impulses by which he is swayed, his ambition to become king is much the strongest. It is almost an obsession. In his most reflective mood he is ready to sacrifice for it, under certain conditions, his chance of happiness hereafter :

That but this blow [i.e. the murder of Duncan]
Might be the be-all and the end-all here,
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
We'ld jump the life to come.
(Act I, Sc. vii, l. 4.)

He is born regal. Even while he is still a subject he speaks the language of kings, " Kind gentlemen, your pains are register'd where every day I turn the leaf to read them " (Act I, Sc. iii, l. 150). And Shakespeare is at some pains to make it clear that this ambition did not originate with the witches' salutation " All hail, Macbeth, thou shalt be king hereafter ! " (Act I, Sc. iii, l. 50). The start which he gives on this occasion, and which is noticed by Banquo, is significant. But the words of Lady Macbeth in Act I, Sc. vii, l. 47, are still more explicit :

What beast was't then
That made you break this enterprize to me ?
When you durst do it, then you were a man ;
. . . . .
. . . Nor time nor place
Did then adhere, *and yet you would make both* :
They have made themselves, and that their fitness now
Does unmake you.

The words in italics, " and yet you would make both," do not correspond with anything which has happened in the play. Macbeth's letter (Act I, Sc. v, l. 1) does not " break any enterprize," though it would be significant to somebody who could read his thoughts between the lines. It was Lady Macbeth, not Macbeth, who first suggested the murder of Duncan, when " time and place " had " made themselves " (Act I, Sc. v, ll. 61–71), and all that she gets from her husband is a hesitating " We will speak further." And these further thoughts

(Act I, Sc. vii, ll. 1–28) decide him against the murder (*ibid.*, l. 31): "We will proceed no further in this business." The occasion, therefore, on which Macbeth was both determined to make a bid for the crown and prepared to make the time and place for it must have been earlier than the opening of the play. We infer a scene, not presented on the stage, in which he had unfolded his hopes to his wife and discussed with her the possible ways and means of realising them.

But to return to Macbeth's ambition. Not to become king is to have lived in vain, to have missed "the ornament of life." That is with him an *idée fixe*; it is, so to speak, the major premise in his logic of life. Hence the temptation to make away with Duncan, when the latter has put himself, unexpectedly, within his power. But he would never have yielded to the temptation, if he had been able to read his conscience as clearly as he could read his motives. His natural feelings are strong against murder. Lady Macbeth even credits him with some of the gentler virtues, and considers him to be "full o' the milk of human kindness" (Act I, Sc. v, l. 18). We may doubt that. Lady Macbeth was not really a good judge of character, and she probably mistook caution for kindness. But he esteems honour, and he knows what pity is. It is significant, no doubt, that he should think of it as "a naked new-born babe" (Act I, Sc. vii, l. 21); that is to say, as something associated with weakness. Still, he recognises it as a force in life, which has to be taken into account. And, as a soldier, he

despises treachery. Dissimulation is repugnant to him. When circumstances require him to assume a mask, he loathes the necessity and wears the mask badly. "False face must hide," he exclaims in real anguish (Act I, Sc. vii, l. 82), "what the false heart doth know." And his wife has constantly to remind him that he cannot even command a "false face." "Your face, my thane," she warns him, "is as a book where men may read strange matters" (Act I, Sc. v, l. 63). All his instincts appear to be sound, but his conscience—for he has a conscience—is confused and undeveloped. He is constantly aware of the powers of darkness, but of the powers of light he is hardly conscious. A "blessing" is for him only a kind of charm, so that he can ask during the actual performance of a murder:

> But wherefore could not I pronounce 'Amen'?
> I had most need of blessing, and 'Amen'
> Stuck in my throat.
>
> (Act II, Sc. ii, l. 31.)

He is accustomed to think, not in terms of right and wrong, but of brave and cowardly, and his obscure conscience speaks to him in the language and the images of fear. But fear is cowardly. Seen through the contempt of his wife for them, his scruples become to him contemptible. He never succeeds in persuading himself, as his wife persuades herself, that the murder of Duncan is "this night's great business," or "our great quell." It remains for him a horrible and odious slaughter. But his major premise (which he never questions) involves

him in a false logic. If sovereignty demands the sacrifice of self, the sacrifice must be made. The end does not justify the means, but it imposes them ; and the means are so repugnant that the performance of them becomes an almost heroic feat.

But, ambitious as Macbeth is, he is no gambler. He admires Banquo's " wisdom " which " doth guide his valour to act in safety " (Act III, Sc. i, l. 53) ; and he cultivates the quality in himself. He desires the crown, but he must have it safely. The fear of failure is the last and the strongest of the deterrent motives which make him hesitate to murder Duncan. Neither Lady Macbeth's scorn nor her resolute will would have prevailed, unless she had been able to convince him that her plan was water-tight. It is this conviction which makes him at last exclaim :

> Bring forth men-children only ;
> For thy undaunted mettle should compose
> Nothing but males. Will it not be received,
> When we have mark'd with blood those sleepy two
> Of his own chamber, and used their very daggers,
> That they have done't ?
>
> (Act I, Sc. vii, l. 72.)

" Who dares receive it other," replies his wife, " as we shall make our griefs and clamour roar upon his death ? " And then, and not till then, Macbeth comes to a decision : " I am settled, and bend up each corporal agent to this terrible feat."

And so the die is cast. Duncan is killed and Macbeth ascends the throne. But success brings no satisfaction. In Act III he is a changed man, a man possessed by fears, imaginary for the most

part, for he is in no real danger, but none the less terrible. The thought that had nearly proved his salvation :

> But in these cases
> We still have judgement here ; that we but teach
> Bloody instructions, which being taught return
> To plague the inventor : this even-handed justice
> Commends the ingredients of our poison'd chalice
> To our own lips.
>
> (Act I, Sc. vii, l. 7.)

—that thought is now always in the forefront of his brain to torment him. Everywhere he suspects the hidden hand, the secret plot. He expects to be poisoned, assassinated. All his imaginative powers are enlisted on the side of his terror, and he speaks in language of almost hysterical violence :

> But let the frame of things disjoint, both the worlds suffer,
> Ere we will eat our meal in fear, and sleep
> In the affliction of these terrible dreams
> That shake us nightly.
>
> (Act III, Sc. ii, l. 16.)

He can even envy his victim :

> Duncan is in his grave ;
> After life's fitful fever he sleeps well ;
> Treason has done his worst : nor steel, nor poison,
> Malice domestic, foreign levy, nothing,
> Can touch him further.
>
> (*Ibid.*, l. 22.)

It is he, Macbeth, who is now the target for these things, and apprehension keeps him lying " on the torture of the mind, in restless ecstasy."

Meanwhile he and his wife are slowly drifting apart. He no longer shares his thoughts with her, and she does not ask to know them. From his words in Act III, Sc. ii, she could not fail to realise that more murders were to come. When he tells her (l. 37) that his mind is "full of scorpions" so long as Banquo and Fleance are alive, she does indeed reply, "But in them nature's copy's not eterne," which can hardly be anything but an incitement to murder. But she says the words almost mechanically, without animation, and shows no curiosity to learn more; her mind is too full of its own misery. For, while Macbeth is obsessed with fears for the present and the future, she is haunted by the past, and is living over again in her dreams the horrors of that murderous night, which she had affected to treat so lightly.

Macbeth, we said, is a changed man, and, as the play proceeds, he deteriorates rapidly. Fear makes him recklessly cruel, and disappointment fills him with a wild rage. For he has sold his soul to the devil (Act III, Sc. i, l. 69) and got nothing in return. He had bargained for safety, and he has been defrauded. "To be thus is nothing; but to be safely thus" (Act III, Sc. i, l. 48); and he can never feel safe. His very caution becomes a kind of frenzy, till he can exclaim, "For mine own good all causes shall give way" (Act III, Sc. iv, l. 135). Before a man can say that, he must have lost all sense of proportion. And this mood marks the beginning of the end. For a man like Macbeth there can be no such thing as repentance: only

remorse and disillusionment. When, too late, he realises the futility of his ambition, he imputes the fault not to his own mistaken attitude towards life, but to life itself:

> Out, out, brief candle!
> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
> And then is heard no more: it is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
> Signifying nothing.[1]
>
> (Act V, Sc. v, l. 24.)

But to the last he doggedly refuses to admit defeat, and in the final scenes, when the net is closing in, and there is no alternative between death and surrender, he becomes his old fighting self again.

> Ring the alarum-bell! Blow, wind! come, wrack!
> At least we'll die with harness on our back.
>
> (Act V, Sc. v, l. 51.)

This breathes the desperate valour which had excited the sergeant's admiration in the first act of the play:

> But all's too weak:
> For brave Macbeth—well he deserves that name—
> Disdaining fortune, with his brandish'd steel
> Which smoked with bloody execution,
> Like valour's minion carved out his passage
> Till he faced the slave.
>
> (Act I, Sc. ii, l. 15.)

Only we must not miss the dramatic irony of the contrast between this encounter with "the merci-

[1] People seem sometimes to forget that this expresses Macbeth's disillusionment with life, not Shakespeare's.

less Macdonwald " and the last fight with Macduff, " of all men else I have avoided thee."

Macbeth is one of Shakespeare's great creations, and Shakespeare's great creations are very great. But the character provokes one criticism. We feel and understand Macbeth's abhorrence of his own crime, but we hardly realise much strength in his temptation. Man is a rational animal, and his conduct is shaped by his reason, except (and it is a very large exception) when reason is obscured or overwhelmed by passion. In Macbeth's case reason is fortified by instinct. Both speak clearly against the deed. No mere taints of cowardice could stifle them; besides, Macbeth finds the unanswerable reply:

> I dare do all that may become a man;
> Who dares do more is none.
>
> (Act I, Sc. vii, l. 46.)

We feel that only an overmastering passion could conquer so deep a repugnance. It may be that this passion is implicit in the story and in certain of Macbeth's utterances. But it does not obtrude itself on our notice, and certainly Lady Macbeth's analysis of her husband's character does not help us to find it:

> Thou wouldst be great;
> Art not without ambition, but without
> The illness should attend it: what thou wouldst highly,
> That wouldst thou holily; wouldst not play false,
> And yet wouldst wrongly win.
>
> (Act I, Sc. v, l. 19.)

This is something much tamer and more cautious than passion.

Perhaps, however, an Elizabethan audience would not be conscious of any insufficiency of motive. They belonged to an age in which crowns had not yet lost their attractiveness, and it was considered inevitable that anybody who had the slightest chance of winning one would take it regardless of consequences. That is to say, the audience would accept as self-evident Macbeth's major premise. In any case, the difficulty disappears on the stage. It is only when we read and re-read the play and try to get the characters into perspective that we become conscious of it. In the theatre, from the moment when Macbeth first enters on the scene, we are under a spell of excitement, awe and horror—emotions which do not make for criticism. Nor do we ever fail to catch the true note of tragedy. When Macbeth decides to " bend up each corporal agent to this terrible feat," he commits moral suicide. But things might so easily have worked out differently, for he has many of the qualities that belong to greatness. Had he been born a king by right divine, we feel that he was like to have proved most royally. And what a leader he would have made in some glorious but hopeless cause ! His last gesture is superb.

Yet I will try the last : before my body
I throw my warlike shield : lay on, Macduff ;
And damn'd be him that first cries ' Hold, enough ! '
(Act V, Sc. viii, l. 32.)

If he had died otherwise, we should not have been content.

§ 2. Lady Macbeth

If Lady Macbeth had disappeared from the play at the end of Act II, Sc. ii, we should have no quarrel with Malcolm's description of her as merely "fiend-like." As she paints herself in these earlier scenes, she is an almost repulsive figure. "Resolute and attached to her husband" is the best, in fact the only good thing, that we can say of her. For the rest, she is hard, cruel, without scruples, without a conscience, without sentiment, almost without sex. For her there is nothing terrible in the body of a murdered man:

> The sleeping and the dead
> Are but as pictures: 'tis the eye of childhood
> That fears a painted devil.
>
> (Act II, Sc. ii, l. 53.)

Blood is only a useful kind of paint for shifting suspicion on to innocent shoulders:

> If he do bleed,
> I'll gild the faces of the grooms withal,
> For it must seem their guilt.
>
> (*Ibid.*, l. 55.)

She seems almost to gloat over the helplessness of her intended victims, a weary old man and two drugged servants.

> When Duncan is asleep—
> Whereto the rather shall his day's hard journey
> Soundly invite him—his two chamberlains
> Will I with wine and wassail so convince,
> That memory, the warder of the brain,

Shall be a fume, and the receipt of reason
A limbec only ; when in swinish sleep
Their drenched natures lie as in a death,
What cannot you and I perform upon
The unguarded Duncan ? what not put upon
His spongy officers, who shall bear the guilt
Of our great quell ?

(Act I, Sc. vii, l. 61.)

Callousness could go no further. Her description of a treacherous plot, which is to send not only Duncan to his grave but two innocent men to the gallows, as " this night's great business " (Act I, Sc. v, l. 69), is horrible. Her belief in herself, her contempt for the shrinkings of ordinary human flesh, her confidence that she can go through the dreadful task she has set herself without a tremor, seem to argue a heart of stone and nerves of steel. She is the moving spirit in the crime ; hers the driving force, the directing will. She plans the details, supervises their execution and makes good any omissions ; takes back the daggers which Macbeth had brought away and smears the grooms with blood. Throughout the operations she is as cool and collected as a great general on a battlefield. Not once does she lose her head. An owl startles her for a moment, but in the same instant she recognises it for what it is (Act II, Sc. ii, l. 2). There is a sound of knocking, and she locates it at once, " at the south entry " (Act II, Sc. ii, l. 65). All her faculties are under perfect control ; nothing makes her blench. Macbeth, looking at his " hangman's hands," dripping with blood, calls them " a sorry sight." " A foolish

thought," exclaims Lady Macbeth, " to say a sorry sight " (Act II, Sc. ii, l. 22); and, a little later, when she has come back from her ghastly errand in Duncan's chamber, she says :

> My hands are of your colour, but I shame
> To wear a heart so white.
>
> (*Ibid.*, l. 63.)

Nerves of steel indeed !

Yet for the rest of the play the story of Lady Macbeth is a story of collapse, and it begins within a few minutes of the scene in which she had seemed to be completely mistress of herself. It comes too at the most critical moment of all, the discovery by Macduff that Duncan has been murdered, when there is most need for a cool head and consummate acting. The alarum bell is rung, and from all directions people are hurrying to the courtyard, half-dressed and half-awake. Lady Macbeth was prepared for this crisis and had laid down the proper line of conduct for the occasion. " Who dares receive it other " (i.e. than as the crime of the two grooms) she had said (Act I, Sc. vii, l. 77), " as we shall make our griefs and clamour roar upon his death ? " She descends from her room and begins according to plan :

> What's the business,
> That such a hideous trumpet calls to parley
> The sleepers of the house ? speak, speak !
>
> (Act II, Sc. iii, l. 86.)

But, when she is told, not directly, for Macduff turns from her to say to Banquo, " O Banquo, Banquo ! Our royal master's murder'd " (*ibid.*, l. 91), she can

find nothing better to say than " Woe, alas ! What, in our house ? " This is hopelessly inadequate to the situation ; it is almost bathos ; and Banquo makes the contemptuous comment, " Too cruel anywhere." Lady Macbeth is certainly not dominating the scene, as she had intended to do, with her " griefs and clamour," and both Banquo and Macduff seem to brush her aside without much ceremony. After this false opening she shrinks into silence, and at the close of Macbeth's picturesque, but not very convincing explanation of his reasons for slaughtering the two grooms, she cries suddenly, " Help me hence, ho ! " (*ibid.*, l. 124) and faints. Macduff says, " Look to the lady " ; but nobody pays any attention, till, a little later, Banquo repeats, " Look to the lady " (l. 131) and she is carried off.

Is the fainting fit real or counterfeit ? If the latter, its motive can only have been a desire to escape from a situation in which she is painfully aware of her insufficiency. It is certainly not the way in which she had meant to make her exit. A brazen strength, " griefs and clamour," were to be her rôle, not a playing of the woman. But it seems more natural to suppose that she really faints. She has driven herself too hard, and something suddenly snaps within her. Nor does she ever really recover. When next we see her in Act III, Sc. ii, after the coronation at Scone, she is a woman sick in mind and body, listless, brooding. She is still concerned about her husband, anxious that he should play the part of king boldly, confidently, and forget the steps by which he mounted to the throne. She sends for him ; but it is no longer

to pour her spirits into his ear, but to preach what is, in effect, the philosophy of despair.

> Things without all remedy
> Should be without regard : what's done is done.
> (Act III, Sc. ii, l. 11.)

But she no longer controls either the situation or her husband. She hardly even attempts to do so. She asks no questions when Macbeth hints at another " deed of dreadful note " (*ibid.*, l. 44) to be done that night. She is quite content to be left in ignorance of her husband's plans. A dreary acquiescence in the inevitable is the most she can achieve. The " great quell " has proved a great catastrophe :

> Nought's had, all's spent,
> Where our desire is got without content :
> (Act III, Sc. ii, l. 5.)

and the shock of that discovery has taken all zest out of life.

In Act III, Sc. iv, she rouses herself for a last time in a desperate effort to save appearances, and at least attenuate the damning effect of Macbeth's self-revelations. In her language to her husband there is something of her old fire :

> O, these flaws and starts,
> Impostors to true fear, would well become
> A woman's story at a winter's fire,
> Authorized by her grandam.
> (l. 63.)

But Macbeth is beyond control, and the situation is " without all remedy." There is something naïvely inadequate in her attempts at explanation :

> Think of this, good peers,
> But as a thing of custom ; 'tis no other ;
> Only it spoils the pleasure of the time.
>
> (l. 96.)

It reminds us of " What, in our house ? " And her final entreaty :

> I pray you, speak not ; he grows worse and worse ;
> Question enrages him : at once, good night :
> Stand not upon the order of your going,
> But go at once,
>
> (l. 117.)

is a barely concealed admission of defeat.

When the guests have gone, exhausted by her efforts, she sinks back into a kind of apathy, too hopeless even for reproach. Macbeth continues talking. She listens, but hardly takes in the drift of what he is saying. If only one could sleep !

But she cannot sleep. She is " troubled with thick-coming fancies, that keep her from her rest " and are driving her to suicide. And so we pass through the terrible pathos of the sleep-walking scene (Act V, Sc. i) to the " *cry of women* " (Act V, Sc. v) which follows her death by her own hand—how, exactly, we are not told.

In the light of these later developments we have to revise our first impressions about Lady Macbeth, for it is clear that her collapse is due chiefly to her failure to understand herself, and that we cannot accept her at her own valuation. She is evidently something more human, and therefore far more interesting, than the complete and fiend-like murderess.

So we turn back to the earlier scenes for some indication of those ordinary human feelings, which she herself despised as weakness, but without which she would not have become a tragic figure. And we note :

(1) In spite of her apparent confidence in herself, she dares not face the " night's great business " without the aid of a stimulant. " That which hath made them drunk hath made me bold," she says, almost exultantly (Act II, Sc. ii, l. 1), " What hath quench'd them hath given me fire."

(2) Hard though she is, she is not destitute of affection, though she seems to belong to that class of people whose capacity for feeling does not extend beyond their own family. She is obviously fond of her husband, and her ambitions are centred on him, though her affection is often tinged with contempt, and until her sudden collapse she certainly regards herself as his superior in character. Further, she is suddenly moved to something like sentiment by the resemblance between the sleeping Duncan and her own father.

> I laid their daggers ready ;
> He could not miss 'em. Had he not resembled
> My father as he slept, I had done't.
> (Act II, Sc. ii, l. 12.)

(3) Most significant of all, she appeals to the powers of darkness to stifle in her all feelings of pity or remorse :

> Come, you spirits
> That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
> And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full

> Of direst cruelty ! make thick my blood,
> Stop up the access and passage to remorse,
> That no compunctious visitings of nature
> Shake my fell purpose.
>
> (Act I, Sc. v, l. 41.)

People who are naturally and wholeheartedly cruel do not have to spur themselves on to deeds of cruelty. When we exhort ourselves to be brave, it is because we know that we are liable to fear. Lady Macbeth is accessible to feelings of pity and remorse. She knows it, and she is afraid of being overwhelmed by them. By an effort of will she represses, but cannot eliminate, them, and they take their revenge in her subconscious self.

Morally, therefore, Lady Macbeth is not quite the inhuman monster which she makes herself out to be. What else does she unconsciously reveal about herself ?

Within narrow limits she is clear-sighted, practical, and efficient. But the limits are very narrow. The most fatal defect in her intellectual make-up, the cause of her incapacity to achieve great things, is her complete lack of imagination. She sees the surface of life only ; of the hidden forces that underlie it she has no idea. What Bismarck called the " imponderables " do not enter into her calculations. For her there are no imponderables, and she is too limited even to be aware that she has limitations. Her wisdom does not exceed the wisdom of the proverbs. " Where there is a will there is a way," she thinks ; and for her the way seems an easy way. The seizure of the crown is the simplest of problems,

when " time and place " have put the reigning king within your power. Murder him in his sleep, in such a way that suspicion will fall on his attendants ; wash your own hands in a little water ; protest your grief and horror ; and the thing is done, which shall to all your nights and days to come " give solely sovereign sway and masterdom." " How easy is it then ; " as easy and as certain as adding two and two. Of the passions, the hatreds, the suspicions, the rival ambitions, which the murder of Duncan will inevitably let loose, Lady Macbeth takes no account. Her mind is incapable of conceiving them.

There are moments when her lack of imagination, and therefore of understanding, amounts almost to sheer stupidity. When Macbeth, his hands dripping with Duncan's blood, tells her of the voice pronouncing the awful curse :

> Methought I heard a voice cry ' Sleep no more ! Macbeth does murder sleep,' etc.,

she asks, " What *do* you mean ? " Macbeth continues :

> Still it cried ' Sleep no more ! ' to all the house :
> ' Glamis hath murder'd sleep, and therefore Cawdor
> Shall sleep no more : Macbeth shall sleep no more ! '

And once again, with a staggering matter-of-factness and lack of comprehension, Lady Macbeth asks, " Who was it that thus cried ? " (Act II, Sc. ii, ll. 35–44). For her there are no voices other than those which proceed from the human throat.

With this in our memory, we may consider two other well-known passages.

(*a*) MACBETH. If we should fail?
LADY M. We fail!
But screw your courage to the sticking-place,
And we'll not fail.
(Act I, Sc. vii, l. 59.)

The First Folio has "We faile?" i.e. failure is impossible; you have only to screw up your courage and we cannot fail. But if we substitute a semi-colon for the mark of interrogation after "We fail," we get an answer which is, I think, still more typical of Lady Macbeth. She replies simply, "We fail," because that is the obvious matter-of-fact reply, and she cannot grasp the implications of failure. The words have a logical value in her mind but nothing more.

(*b*) LADY M. . . . I have given suck, and know
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,
And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn as you
Have done to this.
(Act I, Sc. vii, l. 54.)

We are told that when Mrs. Siddons declaimed these lines, she raised her voice at the end to an hysterical scream. But Lady Macbeth was not histrionic or hysterical. The image is a horrible one; she knows that it is horrible, and uses it as a strong

argument. But she does not feel it, does not visualise herself actually performing the deed. The words are uttered with a touch of superior scorn. Many of us during the war heard unimaginative people describing what they would like to do to their enemies. They were quite rational, and they spoke emphatically; but we did not take them seriously, and perhaps we need not take these particular words of Lady Macbeth too literally either. Between a cruel thought and the same translated into action there is, fortunately, a great gulf; and we must not forget the sleep-walking scene.

Lady Macbeth's confidence in herself and in her power to shape events is the determining factor in the first two acts of the drama. Without it, the murder would never have been enacted. But her belief that she was a kind of super-woman proved an illusion. It was based on ignorance of life and human nature, not on knowledge. Without imagination there can be no knowledge—except of mathematics. Like other unimaginative wives, she thought that she thoroughly understood a husband whose character was highly complex. And she misread him completely. His imaginative nature was outside her ken. His insight into consequences she mistook for vacillation, his scruples for mere cowardice. Too late she realised that the murder of Duncan had let loose within Macbeth something which carried him beyond her knowledge or control; and the discovery bewildered her. They were to have been "partners of greatness"; they ceased to be even partners in suffering, each drifting to his, or her, doom in lonely

isolation ; so that, when the wife dies, the husband's only comment is an impatient, " She should have died hereafter " (Act V, Sc. v, l. 17), i.e. " This is no time for dying."

Nor does she even understand herself. Cruel, of course, she is. Nobody could plan the murder of an old man and the execution of two innocent servants who was not cruel. But she is not so cruel as she believed herself, and as she would have liked to be. She could brace herself to perform one deed of horror ; but she could not, like Macbeth, go on wading through blood towards an ever receding shore. " The thane of Fife had a wife ; where is she now ? " (Act V, Sc. i, l. 47). She has more of the woman in her than she was aware of, and that one murder kills her. It is not the dread of what *may* happen, but the dreadful realisation of what *has* happened that drives her out of her mind, the appalling discovery of what things really mean. And, characteristically enough, it is the most material of the horrors at which she had scoffed, the blood and the smell of it, which most haunt her memory :

Here's the smell of the blood still : all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh, oh, oh !

(Act V, Sc. i, l. 56.)

We remember how confidently she had said, " A little water clears us of this deed " (Act II, Sc. ii, l. 67). In the greatness of her punishment we forget her crime and feel only pity.

How Shakespeare pictured Lady Macbeth to him-

self we do not know. No doubt he had in his eye the particular boy who was to act the part. Most people, I believe, would make her a tall, dark woman, with a commanding presence and a deep vibrant voice; but it seems easier to imagine her small, fair, with blue or blue-grey eyes, rather catlike in her movements, insinuating when she chooses, as in her welcome of Duncan (Act I, Sc. vi, ll. 14–29), but not at first sight impressive; one, in fact, who could "look like an innocent" (and rather fragile) "flower, but be the serpent under't." Her literal, matter-of-fact nature, cruel, not through passion, but because it is devoid of any touch of sentiment, is found more often in the fair than in the dark type. In any case, she must surely have been small. Incidentally she speaks of "this little hand" (Act V, Sc. 1, l. 57), though that need not signify much. But there would be a distinct point in a physical, as well as a mental, contrast between her and her tall, strong, muscular husband, and the great spirit in a little body would be particularly telling with Macbeth who, as a fighter, would naturally associate smallness with weakness. His profound admiration of her "undaunted mettle" does seem to suggest that he is conscious of some contrast between her courage and resolution on the one side and her muscular insignificance on the other. Moreover, her collapse seems to indicate not only that her spirit was stronger than her flesh, but that the flesh had in it a distinct element of weakness. She seems to lack a robust vitality; and she has no recuperative powers. Again we must not press the point unduly, but this view of her physique is at least in

harmony with the fact that, though she has had children (Act I, Sc. vii, l. 54), none has survived.

And, lastly, horror is the argument of the first two acts, and surely there is something more horrible in a little Lady Macbeth with innocent-looking eyes that suggest no depths, plotting devilish things among all these brawny fighting men who regard her as something merely feminine, or creeping noiselessly and catlike through the chamber of the sleeping Duncan, than there would be in a tall, dark, imperious and masculine woman. There would have been no difficulty in finding a boy who would fit this conception of the part, without much making up ; and we must not forget that Lady Macbeth was acted by a boy.

§ 3. The Malcolm-Macduff Scene (Act IV, Sc. iii)

Macbeth is the shortest of the great tragedies. It would have been even greater if it had been still shorter. Art, as art, is not concerned with length, or bulk, or size. Unfortunately however, when art is to have a market value, these things must be taken into consideration. To convince an audience that it is getting its money's worth, a play must hold the boards for a certain length of time. Full measure, and as much more as the vendor can be prevailed upon to throw in, has always been the demand of the public in the theatre and the concert hall. To be tedious is a lesser sin than to be brief, even in an after-dinner speech. Shakespeare was aware of this,

as he was aware of all the commercial aspects of the drama. As a shareholder in the theatre in which his plays were performed, he had a personal and pecuniary interest in the question, and, if the relevant matter of the play he had in hand proved insufficient, and his inventive powers failed him, he did not hesitate to thrust in padding.

The first occasion in *Macbeth* on which we find him obviously playing for time is the scene (Act III, Sc. i, ll. 74–142) in which Macbeth persuades the two murderers that Banquo has wronged them, and that they owe it to themselves to be revenged on him. He talks to them like a man of infinite leisure, and throws in an otiose description of the various breeds of dogs. Except for a brief moment in Act III, Sc. iv, neither of these men appears again after the murder, and their private motives for the crime are irrelevant to the dramatic purposes of the play. We know quite well that Macbeth could always find men to do his dirty work without any elaborate persuasion ; and, as a matter of fact, in Act III, Sc. iii, we discover, to our surprise, that he has despatched to the scene of action a third murderer, about whom neither we nor his partners in the crime have been told anything.

But the scene in which Shakespeare marks time most unblushingly is Scene iii in Act IV—240 lines. He must have become aware at this point that the play, as he had planned it, would work out as very short measure for the public. Something had to be done to eke it out ; so he expands at inordinate length the meeting between Malcolm and Macduff in

London, an event of minor importance in the plot; and the action of the play is held up while these two indulge in long flights of rhetoric. There is no cogent reason why Malcolm should suspect Macduff or think it necessary to test his sincerity by painting himself in the blackest colours; no reason either why Macduff should accept the grotesque picture as genuine. Macduff was not a simpleton. And all the while the only thing that really mattered, namely the expedition to Scotland, had already been decided on, and

> Old Siward, with ten thousand warlike men,
> Already at a point, was setting forth.
> (l. 134.)

But the manufacture of suspicions has filled up time. More time is filled up by the introduction of a wholly irrelevant episode (ll. 139–59) as a compliment to King James I, the new patron of Shakespeare's company, who prided himself on his miraculous gift of healing in cases of scrofula, known as "the King's evil." Then at last we come to an incident which is really germane to the play. Ross enters with the news that Macduff's wife and children have been murdered by the tyrant. But he is very "niggard of speech," and forty-seven lines are required to acquaint Macduff with the tragedy. Then for a moment Shakespeare finds the great language of his great drama.

MALCOLM. Merciful heaven!
What, man! ne'er pull your hat upon your brows;

Give sorrow words: the grief that does not speak
Whispers the o'erfraught heart, and bids it break.
(l. 207.)

There are other fine lines in this scene; Shakespeare could never write for long, even at his laziest, without coining some golden phrase. But we are conscious, all the time, that his heart is not in this Malcolm-Macduff interlude. We can almost see him turning over the pages of his authority, Holinshed, and paraphrasing as he read—a sign sure that his interest was at a low ebb. And in so doing, with almost incredible carelessness he tars Macbeth with vices which do not seem to belong to him. We "grant him bloody"; but lustful, avaricious (l. 57)? There has been no hint of such flaws in any of the previous scenes. They take us by surprise, and leave us incredulous. Nor is the tragedy of his downfall heightened by multiplying his crimes:

. . . each new morn
New widows howl, new orphans cry, new sorrows
Strike heaven on the face.
(l. 4.)

With the murder of Duncan, Banquo, Lady Macduff and her children, Macbeth has enough on his conscience to justify the language which he uses about himself, and prove that he can be "bloody, bold and resolute." In the great tragedies, for our knowledge of the hero we look to the hero himself. It is credible that more murders than that of the Macduffs may be implicit in the threat "for mine own good all causes

shall give way," but if lust and avarice are a part of Macbeth's nature, they would certainly have been indicated in the early and crucial scenes of self-revelation. In short, we can hardly escape the conclusion that in this particular scene Shakespeare has sacrificed his own conception of Macbeth to the Macbeth of the story he was dramatising.

This carelessness about detail, this indifference to consistency, have always been a stumbling-block to those who expect to find in any play by Shakespeare nothing that is not consummate art of its kind. But, in truth, Shakespeare was no more a Puritan in his art than he was in his morals, and he seems to have taken his own genius very lightly. He was often a conscious artist, but not always a conscientious one, and he had none of the scholar's passion for accuracy. His was an amazing, but a careless and untutored, genius. When his imagination was kindled, he could work miracles, and work them with an almost effortless ease. But the spirit did not always move him. Sometimes, no doubt, he was tired, sometimes pressed for time, sometimes he lost interest for the moment in his subject. At such times he would turn to the pages of his authority and write like a schoolboy who is cribbing an essay from the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. He had a fatal facility for rhetoric, and trusted that a few resounding lines would conceal the lack of careful craftsmanship. If the thing acted, that was enough ; and he generally made it act.

These things vexed Ben Jonson, but they need not vex us. We must take Shakespeare as he was, and

enjoy him as we find him. After all, there is more human interest in the lapses of genius than in its transcendency, and we do not love our Shakespeare less because, with all his Olympian greatness and impenetrability, we sometimes find in him a touch of the schoolboy.

VII

THE PROBLEMS OF HAMLET

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§ 1. Introductory

Hamlet, from the first, was one of the most popular, if not *the* most popular, of all Shakespeare's plays, and it has remained so ever since. The attractiveness of the central figure, the enigma of his personality, the nature of the problem which he failed to solve, have proved a powerful stimulus to the ingenuity of scholars and critics in many lands. Volumes have been written about him, and volumes will continue to be written; for the theme seems inexhaustible, and general agreement unthinkable. He holds the same kind of place in literature that certain great but complex characters hold in history. Indeed, he has almost become an historical figure, so vivid is he, in spite of his ambiguity. It is easy to theorise about *Hamlet*—especially if we ignore the text. But if we refuse to accept as satisfactory any solution which does not take into account all the seeming contradictions in his character the task is much harder. Different writers, some of them of great authority and distinction, have held different views about him. To Goethe he was a man of "a lovely, and most moral nature, who, without the strength of nerve which forms a hero, sinks beneath a burden which he cannot bear and must not cast

away." He is the idealist in advance of his time, and therefore unable to carry out the rough kind of justice which his time demands. To others (and this is perhaps the most widely accepted view) he is the thinker, the man who, from an excessive indulgence of the speculative habit, has become incapable of action. Lastly there is Professor A. C. Bradley's view which is the most nearly convincing of all. His explanation is briefly this. Hamlet is by nature not only an intellectual but a man of action ; but, before his father's death, he has been gripped by some nervous malady akin to neurasthenia ; this physical disability is aggravated by the discovery of his uncle's treachery and his mother's guilt, and makes it impossible for him to act as he feels that he ought to act.

The object of this study is not to discuss these rival theories, but to set out, as concisely and as clearly as possible, all the difficulties which have to be faced and solved before we can regard the play as a consistent whole, and Hamlet as a complete and intelligible character ; and, having done so, to draw certain conclusions.

With these conclusions some of my readers may possibly agree ; others most certainly will not ; for, as I have already said, complete agreement about *Hamlet* is unthinkable. At all events, I hope that many may be glad to have, in a convenient form, a plain statement of the questions which are raised by the play.

It is necessary, by way of preface, to say a few words about the sources of *Hamlet*, because of the excessive reverence which Shakespeare sometimes

showed to his authorities. He did not invent his plots ; he took them from works of history or romance, generally well known, and frequently already dramatised by other playwrights. He read into them a new psychology, discovered new motives, added characters of his own creation ; and, having done this, he sometimes sacrificed dramatic probability by adhering too rigidly to some episode in the original story. This happens often in the Comedies, and we must not rule out the possibility of its having happened in *Hamlet* also. We may, at all events, remember that, when he began to write *Hamlet*, Shakespeare was still feeling his way into the world of Tragedy and had not acquired quite the certainty of touch that we recognise in *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Othello*, and *Coriolanus*.

The Hamlet story was first written by Saxo Grammaticus, a Danish author of the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, in his *Historia Danica*. It was translated into French in 1570, in a volume called *Histoires Tragiques*, and into English in 1608. Shakespeare, therefore, could not have seen the English translation when he wrote his play ; but he was probably familiar with the French version. In the Danish story, Amleth's uncle, Fengo, murders his (Amleth's) father, Horwendil, seizes the crown, and marries the dead man's widow, Gerutha. The ghost reveals the murder to Amleth, and summons him to avenge it. In order to disarm his uncle's hostility, Amleth feigns madness. But the King is suspicious and throws a beautiful girl in his way, in order to test him. But the girl is already in love with Amleth,

and nothing is betrayed. A courtier, who has been set to spy on him, plays the eavesdropper in the Queen's closet. Amleth kills him, dismembers the body and throws it to the pigs. He is then sent to England with two companions, and contrives that they shall both be killed immediately after landing. He then marries the King of England's daughter, returns to Denmark, and carries out his revenge. The story continues with Amleth in it; but, as Shakespeare did not follow it further, neither need we.

In addition to the *Histoires Tragiques* there was a play, referred to by Nash in 1589, on the story of *Hamlet*. It is generally supposed to have been by Kyd, and, though no copy of it is extant, contemporary allusions to it prove that there was a ghost in it, and that its theme was Hamlet's revenge. That Shakespeare borrowed other features from this play besides the ghost is extremely probable.

§ 2. Some Data

The problems which we meet with in Shakespeare are generally of two kinds: those which are inherent in the story that he dramatised, and those which spring from his own development of the characters. When the difficulty is of the first kind, it has to be left unsolved. We may wonder, for instance, why Hamlet, who was highly gifted, popular, and of a suitable age, was not elected King in succession to his father. But it is useless to look for any explana-

tion in the text. He was passed over, in favour of his uncle, in the story; that is enough. Shakespeare accepted the situation without trying to account for it.

But it is a different matter when we find, or think we have found, contradictions in the characters themselves; when, for example, we find Hamlet insisting in one place that his madness is feigned (Act III, Sc. iv, l. 187), and in another that it is real (Act V, Sc. ii, l. 243). In this case, we shall certainly try to find something in Hamlet's character which will account for the apparent contradiction; for we are bound to assume that Shakespeare saw his great creations steadily and whole; and, without being vain, we shall not readily admit that his conception was too subtle for our understanding.

But, before we attempt to deal with any of these problems, it will be well to give some preliminary data, to fix the age of Hamlet, and the time at which some of the events recorded in the play must necessarily have happened.

(1) Hamlet is thirty years old—his age is fixed by the grave-digger in Act V, Sc. i, l. 153:

HAMLET. How long hast thou been a grave-maker?

1ST CLOWN. Of all the days i' the year, I came to't that day that our last King Hamlet o'ercame Fortinbras.

HAMLET. How long is that since?

1ST CLOWN. Cannot you tell that? . . . it was that very day that young Hamlet was born; he that is mad, and sent into England. . . . I have been sexton here, man and boy, thirty years.

This is confirmed in the same scene, l. 189 :

1st Clown. Here's a skull now : this skull has lain in the earth three and twenty years.
Hamlet. Whose was it ?
1st Clown. A whoreson mad fellow's it was : whose do you think it was ? . . . This same skull, sir, was Yorick's skull, the king's jester.
Hamlet. Alas, poor Yorick ! I knew him, Horatio . . .
He hath borne me on his back a thousand times . . .
Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft.

It is evident that by thus twice underlining Hamlet's age Shakespeare intended to impress upon us that his hero was not a youth, though we should naturally have expected this information to be given earlier in the play. The range of Hamlet's thought, his experience of life, and the nature of his disillusionment with it, all require a man who has reached a certain stage of maturity. On the other hand, earlier in the play, both Laertes and Polonius lay stress on Hamlet's youth. Laertes calls his affection for Ophelia " a violet in the youth of primy nature " (Act I, Sc. iii, l. 8) ; and Polonius in the same scene (l. 123) says :

For Lord Hamlet,
Believe so much in him, that he is young,

and therefore his passions are neither lasting nor under control. The " *young* Hamlet " of the gravedigger is clearly only meant to distinguish him from his father, Old Hamlet.

(2) Since Hamlet is thirty, the Queen, his mother, must be at least forty-eight. Her age makes her sensuality particularly repugnant to her son:

HAMLET. You cannot call it love, for at your age
The hey-day in the blood is tame, it's humble.
. . . . . .
O shame! where is thy blush? Rebellious hell,
If thou canst mutine in a matron's bones,
To flaming youth let virtue be as wax.
(Act III, Sc. iv, l. 68.)

Still, forty-eight is rather old for the part, and we should have preferred her much nearer forty; for the King's infatuation for her is always described as being of a purely physical nature, and she has no charm of mind or character that would account for it otherwise. It rather looks as if Shakespeare's conception of Hamlet as a man of thirty, and not of twenty as the story made him, had got him into difficulties. Doubtless he did not intend us to calculate the Queen's age too nicely.

(3) When the play opens, Hamlet's father has been dead for about two months:

But two months dead! nay, not so much, not two.
(Act I, Sc. ii, l. 138.)

The "o'erhasty marriage" between the widow and her brother-in-law took place within a month of the funeral:

And yet, within a month . . .
A little month, or ere those shoes were old

With which she follow'd my poor father's body,
Like Niobe, all tears, . . .
She married.

(*Ibid.*, l. 145.)

Hamlet intends to return to Wittenberg, whence, we infer, he had come on hearing of his father's death; but he is persuaded to remain at Elsinore.

KING. For your intent
In going back to school in Wittenberg,
It is most retrograde to our desire.

. . . . .

QUEEN. Let not thy mother lose her prayers, Hamlet:
I pray thee stay with us; go not to Wittenberg.
HAMLET. I shall in all my best obey you, madam.

(*Ibid.*, l. 112.)

From the King's words, "How is it that the clouds *still* hang on you?" (l. 66) and his own language in lines 129–58, we gather that Hamlet is in a state of deep dejection, and has been so ever since his return to Elsinore.

(4) It is, therefore, something of a surprise when we realise that Hamlet must have fallen in love with Ophelia since his father's death. Laertes treats the affair as something quite recent, and Polonius has only just heard of it:

POLONIUS. Marry, well bethought:
'Tis told me, he hath very oft *of late*
Given private time to you, and you yourself
Have of your audience been most free and bounteous:
If it be so—as so 'tis put on me,

And that in way of caution—I must tell you,
You do not understand yourself so clearly
As it behoves my daughter and your honour.
What is between you ? give me up the truth.

OPHELIA. He hath, my lord, *of late* made many tenders
Of his affection to me.

(Act I, Sc. iii, l. 90.)

If Hamlet had *not* been at Wittenberg, the twice repeated words " of late " might possibly have covered the weeks preceding the murder.

(5) Between Act I and Acts II and III, two months have elapsed.

HAMLET. Look you, how cheerfully my mother looks, and my father died within's two hours.

OPHELIA. Nay, 'tis twice two months, my lord.

(Act III, Sc. ii, l. 133.)

There is about the same interval between Act III and Acts IV and V. Laertes has heard of his father's death and has returned secretly to Denmark. Hamlet has been practising fencing assiduously ever since Lamond, who was at court " two months since " (Act IV, Sc. vii, l. 82), excited his jealousy by praising Laertes' skill with the rapier.

(6) Shakespeare produced more than one version of *Hamlet.*

(*a*) A book entered in the Stationers' Register in 1602 and called *The Revenge of Hamlet, Prince of Denmarke,* may have contained his first attempt.

(*b*) In 1603 there was published an edition of Shakespeare's play, which is known as the First

Quarto. This was undoubtedly an unauthorised work and seems to have been compiled from shorthand notes, taken during the performances. It differs in some important respects from the play as we have it. The Queen is less guilty, swears by heaven that she "never knew of this most horrible murder," and promises to help Hamlet. Polonius is called Corambis, and Reynaldo, Montano.

(*c*) In 1604 appeared the Second Quarto, an enlarged and authorised edition of the play. It is longer than the First Quarto by more than 1,000 lines and contains some 200 lines which are not found in the First Folio.

(*d*) The First Folio was published in 1623, seven years after Shakespeare's death, by his fellow-actors, Heminge and Condell. It contains 85 lines which are not found in the Second Quarto. Our present text is based on a combination of the First Folio and the Second Quarto.

The points to remember are these :

(1) The Second Quarto and the First Folio give slightly different acting versions of the play. But the differences are not important, and both contain the problems with which we shall have to deal.

(2) It is unsafe to regard the First Quarto as anything but an imperfect and mangled version of the play as we have it in the Second Quarto.

(3) There may have been an earlier version of the play than that contained in the Second Quarto ; but this is still a conjecture.

What we may reasonably assume is that, when Shakespeare took up the theme of Hamlet, his first

thoughts about some of the principal characters differed considerably from his second thoughts, and that in his second thoughts his own Hamlet grew less and less like the Amleth of the Danish story or the hero of Kyd's drama.

§ 3. The Problem of Horatio

It is quite possible for the spectator, and even for the casual reader, not to notice that Horatio presents any problem at all. He has no very marked individuality. He is a listener rather than a talker, the audience for Hamlet's comments on life and people. Only once does he offer any advice, namely when in Act V, Sc. ii, l. 228, he urges Hamlet to abandon the fencing match with Laertes. On all other occasions he is content to say ditto to his friend.

But as soon as we begin to look more closely into what we are told about him, we meet with difficulties. We should naturally assume him to be older than Hamlet, for in Act I, Sc. i, he can remember the armour which the late King wore "when he the ambitious Norway combated," and, according to the grave-digger, that combat took place in the year of Hamlet's birth. Hamlet says to him:

> Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice,
> And could of men distinguish, her election
> Hath seal'd thee for herself: for thou hast been
> As one, in suffering all, who suffers nothing.
> (Act III, Sc. ii, l. 68.)

The friendship, therefore, must be of long standing, and it is rather surprising to find that Horatio who,

according to his own account, had come to Elsinore to see the late King's funeral, should have remained there for nearly a month without seeing Hamlet. Nor is their first meeting like that of old and intimate friends :

> HAMLET. Horatio—or I do forget myself.
> HOR. The same, my lord, and your poor servant ever.
> HAM. Sir, my good friend ; I'll change that name with you :
>
> (Act I, Sc. ii, l. 161.)

But that is a comparatively small matter. Much more surprising is the fact that there are in the play two quite different versions of Horatio's antecedents.

(*a*) There is in Act I, Sc. i, the Horatio of the Danish story, a " friend to this ground and liegeman to the Dane " (l. 15). He speaks of " *our* last King " (l. 80), and " *our* state " (l. 101). Bernardo and Marcellus treat him as an old friend. He is better informed than they, and can tell them the cause of the military preparations that are being made (l. 79). He is well acquainted with the history and politics of Denmark (l. 80). He is appealed to as one who knew the late King well :

> MARCELLUS. Is it not like the king ?
> HOR. As thou art to thyself :
> Such was the very armour he had on
> When he the ambitious Norway combated ;
> So frown'd he once, when, in an angry parle,
> He smote the sledded Polacks on the ice.
>
> (l. 58.)

Again in Act I, Sc. ii (ll. 189–end of scene), he is a friend of Marcellus and Bernardo, and, apparently, an *habitué* of the court. Otherwise, why should they have "imparted" their strange experience to him "in dreadful secrecy"? In this passage too he has personal knowledge of the late King: for he says (l. 211), "I knew your father; these hands are not more like"; and again in line 241, "it" (namely his beard) "was, as I have seen it in his life, a sable silver'd."

Again in Act IV, Sc. v, after Hamlet has set sail for England, he is still at court and in attendance on the Queen; and in Sc. vi of the same Act he is in a position to procure for the sailors an audience with the King.

(*b*) In Act I, Sc. ii, ll. 161–86, and again in Sc. iv (the first 37 lines) there is a different Horatio who is a stranger to the court and not a native of Denmark at all. Hamlet addresses him as "fellow-student" (Sc. ii, l. 177), asks him what has brought him to Elsinore from Wittenberg (ll. 168 and 174), and adds:

> We'll teach you to drink deep ere you depart.
> (l. 175.)

This Horatio is ignorant of Danish customs and of the manners of the court. He hears a *flourish of trumpets and ordnance fired off within*, and asks:

> What doth this mean, my lord?
> (Act I, Sc. iv, l. 7.)

Hamlet explains that the King is " taking his rouse," and Horatio asks again, " Is it a custom ? " Hamlet replies :

Ay, marry, is't :
But to my mind, though I am native here
And to the manner born, it is a custom
More honour'd in the breach than the observance.

Hamlet's statement that *he* is " to the manner born " shows that the custom is an old one, and his words " though *I* am native here " clearly imply that Horatio was not. Indeed, Hamlet proceeds to tell his friend that his countrymen are great drinkers, a piece of information which would have been superfluous if Horatio had been a Dane.

Again, this second Horatio is not familiar with the personal appearance of the late King (Act I, Sc. ii, l. 184) :

HAM. My father !—methinks I see my father.
HOR. O where, my lord ?
HAM. In my mind's eye, Horatio.
HOR. I saw him *once* ; he was a goodly king.

In its context, and in connection with " I saw," " once " cannot, I think, be forced into meaning anything but on one occasion. Moreover, we find that this Horatio does not know the people at the court. He has never heard of Yorick, King Hamlet's jester (Act V, Sc. i, l. 203), nor of Osric (Act V, Sc. ii, l. 85) ; and Hamlet has to point out Laertes to him (Act V, Sc. i, l. 247) with

That is Laertes, a very noble youth.

Such discrepancies are too glaring to be reconciled, and we are forced to the conclusion that, when he wrote Act I, Sc. i, Shakespeare intended to make Horatio the counterpart of Amleth's foster-brother in the Danish story, i.e. a Dane, brought up with Hamlet, and familiar with the court, but that when he wrote Act I, Sc. ii, ll. 161–86, and Sc. iv, ll. 1–37,[1] he had changed his mind, and substituted a Wittenberg friend of Hamlet's and a stranger to Elsinore. If this is so, we naturally ask two questions.

(1) *When* did Shakespeare change his mind ?

The change, as we have seen, comes abruptly in the second scene of Act I, ll. 161–86. It is difficult to believe that when he first wrote Act I, Shakespeare started with one conception of Horatio in Sc. i, changed it in Sc. ii, ll. 161–86, jumped back to his first idea in the same scene (ll. 189 to end), and returned to his second idea in Sc. iv, ll. 1–37.[1] It seems more reasonable to suppose that these second thoughts about Horatio were later thoughts and that they were inserted at some later date, and rather carelessly, into the text of the original draft.

(2) *Why* did Shakespeare change his mind ?

Horatio has no dramatic importance apart from Hamlet, and if Shakespeare changed his mind about the one, the reason probably was that he had also changed his mind about the other ; in short, that his second thoughts about Hamlet differed from his first thoughts, and that, as his hero's character developed on different lines from those of the

[1] And, with one or two exceptions, throughout the rest of the play.

Danish story, he found it necessary to provide him with a different kind of friend.

Many other questions suggest themselves in this connection, about which we will say nothing here. We will merely note that we have two different accounts of Horatio sandwiched into the text of Act I, like the two stories of the Creation in the early chapters of Genesis. And this fact is at least significant; for is it not possible that what has happened in one case may have happened in another, and that we shall find in the play two different conceptions of Hamlet himself?

§ 4. The Problem of the Queen

The question which we have to ask about the Queen is this: to what extent was she guilty?

For enlightenment on this point we naturally turn first to the Ghost's revelations in Act I, Sc. v, l. 42, and this is what we read:

Ghost. Ay, that incestuous, that adulterate beast,
With witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts,—
O wicked wit and gifts that have the power
So to seduce!—won to his shameful lust
The will of my most seeming-virtuous queen:
O Hamlet, what a falling off was there!

He then relates how he was murdered by his brother in the orchard, bids Hamlet avenge him, and concludes:

But, howsoever thou pursuest this act,
Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive

Against thy mother aught ; leave her to heaven,
And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge,
To prick and sting her.

(l. 84.)

It is clear, therefore, that the Queen had committed adultery before the murder, and the implication seems to be that she was also privy to the greater crime. At all events, Hamlet understands it so in his interview with his mother in Act III, Sc. iv :

QUEEN. O, what a rash and bloody deed is this !

(Hamlet has just killed Polonius.)

HAMLET. A bloody deed ! almost as bad, good mother,
As kill a king, and marry with his brother.
QUEEN. As kill a king !
HAMLET. Ay, lady, 'twas my word.

(l. 26.)

After the play-scene, at which the Queen had just been present, there could be no possible doubt about the meaning of these words. The Queen is directly accused of murdering her husband. She neither admits the charge nor denies it, and it is not mentioned again.

Now, if the Queen was really privy to the crime, she was a consummate actress. She had followed her dead husband's body to the grave, " like Niobe, all tears " (Act I, Sc. ii, l. 149) ; she sat through the play-scene without showing any sign (as the King did) that her own withers were wrung, and she affected

to regard it as an insult to the King rather than to herself:

> Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended.
> (Act III, Sc. iv, l. 9.)

Her reply to Hamlet's question, "Madam, how like you this play?" "The lady doth protest too much, methinks," must have been profoundly cynical, and not, as it seems to be, rather naïve. Only once (Act IV, Sc. v, l. 17):

> [*Aside*]
> To my sick soul, as sin's true nature is,
> Each toy seems prologue to some great amiss:
> So full of artless jealousy is guilt,

does she betray, by a start or an aside, the prick of the thorns which are lodged in her bosom.

But the Queen never does give us the impression of being a great criminal and a consummate actress. She strikes us rather as a not very clearly defined and rather stupid woman, sensual, but with some amiable qualities.

Though an unfaithful wife, she is a fond mother. The King is obviously quite candid when he explains to Laertes why he cannot proceed openly against Hamlet:

> KING. O, for two special reasons
> Which may to you perhaps seem much unsinew'd,
> But yet to me they're strong. *The queen his mother*
> *Lives almost by his looks*; and for myself—
> My virtue or my plague, be it either which—
> She's so conjunctive to my life and soul,

That, as the star moves not but in his sphere,
I could not but by her.

(Act IV, Sc. vii, l. 9.)

And her behaviour to Hamlet bears this out. She dislikes the sight of suffering. At first she refuses to see Ophelia in her madness (Act IV, Sc. v, l. 1), but, when the poor girl is admitted, she is moved to womanly compassion; and, when scattering flowers into the grave, she uses some touching language:

Sweets to the sweet: farewell!
I hoped thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife;
I thought thy bride-bed to have deck'd, sweet maid,
And not have strew'd thy grave.

(Act V, Sc. i, l. 266.)

Is that the language of a murderess?

Strangely enough, too, she is allowed to deliver the beautiful poem which describes Ophelia's death —she who had said to Polonius "More matter with less art."

There is a willow grows aslant a brook,
That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream;
There with fantastic garlands did she come
Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples,
That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,
But our cold maids do dead men's fingers call them:
There, on the pendent boughs her coronet weeds
Clambering to hang, an envious sliver broke;
When down her weedy trophies and herself
Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,
And mermaid-like a while they bore her up:
Which time she chanted snatches of old tunes,
As one incapable of her own distress,

> Or like a creature native and indued
> Unto that element : but long it could not be
> Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
> Pull'd the poor wretch from her melodious lay
> To muddy death.
>
> (Act IV, Sc. vii, l. 167.)

It is never safe to lay down rules for Shakespeare. His passion for romance and his instinct for reality are continually at war with one another in his plays, and either may crop up in the most unlikely places. But he does not generally allow his characters to wander so far from dramatic probability if he has visualised them clearly. The Queen is not so visualised. I fancy that, unless he is consciously on the alert, the average reader is left with the impression that she was guilty of nothing worse than a hasty marriage with her brother-in-law. One feels tempted to suppose that, when he wrote the ghost scene, Shakespeare meant her to have connived at least at her husband's death ; that he afterwards changed his mind and thought of her as guilty only of adultery—perhaps not even of that ; and that he failed to reconcile the two ideas in the final acting version of the play.

One word may be added here about the King. The story would lead us to expect a bold and self-reliant man, for he had been able to brush aside the claims of Hamlet (thirty, and popular) to the crown, and had defied public opinion by marrying his brother's widow within a month of the funeral. But such is not the King whom we find in the play. He is never a very convincing villain. He may look

the part on the stage, but he does not read like it in the study. He behaves with dignity and courage when faced by Laertes :

> Let him go, Gertrude ; do not fear our person :
> There's such divinity doth hedge a king,
> That treason can but peep to what it would,
> Acts little of his will.
>
> (Act IV, Sc. v, l. 122.)

And he utters the often misquoted phrase that " When sorrows come, they come not single spies, but in battalions."

Otherwise he is treacherous, but rather tame. He is pompous and almost apologetic about his marriage in Act I, Sc. ii ; he has frequent twinges of remorse ; he pockets Hamlet's affronts with great docility ; and in the last scene of all he is abject—' O, yet defend me, friends ; I am but hurt."

The truth is, of course, that Shakespeare's conception of Hamlet did not quite fit in with the story. If the King had been a provocative, overbearing man, a tyrant and a bully, it would have been much easier for Hamlet to kill him. It is his very tameness which makes him an unsuitable subject for slaughter ; and Shakespeare, no doubt, toned him down deliberately. He is frequently on the stage, but never, except once, is he allowed to dominate it.

§ 5. The Problem of Hamlet and Ophelia

The questions which we naturally ask about Hamlet in this connection are three in number :

First, did he really love Ophelia ?

Secondly, if so, why did he cease to love her ?

Thirdly, why did he treat her with such harshness and even brutality ?

(1) The answer to the first question is a positive "yes." Ophelia certainly believed that she was loved, and Hamlet, in Act III, Sc. i, l. 115, says, "I did love you once"; and, though he contradicts himself the next moment by adding, "I loved you not," it is evident that the first assertion is genuine and the second is mockery. But, apart from this, the letter which Polonius reads to the King in Act II, Sc. ii, l. 109, is conclusive; for nobody can believe that Hamlet would, under any circumstances, indulge in a heartless flirtation, and least of all when he was mourning the death of a beloved father.

I quote the letter here in full :

To the celestial, and my soul's idol, the most beautified Ophelia, in her excellent white bosom, these, &c.

Doubt thou the stars are fire ;
Doubt that the sun doth move ;
Doubt truth to be a liar ;
But never doubt I love.

O dear Ophelia, I am ill at these numbers ; I have not art to reckon my groans ; but that I love thee best, O most best, believe it. Adieu.

Thine evermore, most dear lady, whilst this machine is to him, HAMLET.

I think that, if one were given this letter suddenly and asked to guess the age of the writer, one would say that he was a clever young man, well on the right side of twenty-five. That, however, is only a matter

of opinion, and a man in love is always young. Still, as I have already pointed out, both Laertes and Polonius do lay stress on Hamlet's youth, and Ophelia does not contradict them.

(2) Why then did Hamlet cease to love? He answers that question himself, when he tells his mother that she has done

> such an act
> That blurs the grace and blush of modesty,
> Calls virtue hypocrite, *takes off the rose*
> *From the fair forehead of an innocent love*,
> And sets a blister there;
> (Act III, Sc. iv, l. 40.)

In other words, the discovery of *her* guilt has destroyed his faith in all women and made him morbidly suspicious. The first indication which Ophelia receives of this change in Hamlet's feelings is when he comes into her closet, with his doublet unbraced, no hat on his head, stockings fouled and down-gyved to his ankles, and, with a piteous look on his face, seizes her by the wrist, scans her face, as if he would read her inmost soul, and then with a profound sigh backs slowly out of the room. (Act II, Sc. i, l. 75.)

This episode, which is described, not acted, raises a further question. Was it merely a first essay in feigning madness? That is surely incredible. The action may have been consciously exaggerated, but the motive of the visit is plain: Hamlet had begun to suspect the integrity of Ophelia, and the thought was torture. He tried to reassure himself, and failed. Immediately afterwards, by singular ill luck, Ophelia

confirmed his suspicions. His first greeting, when he meets her unexpectedly in Act III, Sc. i, l. 88, indicates pleasure as well as surprise :

> Soft you now !
> The fair Ophelia ! Nymph, in thy orisons
> Be all my sins remember'd.

But, almost immediately, he sees something stirring behind the arras, suspects a trap, and becomes harsh and rude. Then suddenly (l. 133) he turns on her with the question " Where's your father ? " Ophelia hesitates for a moment before she replies, " At home, my lord " ; and Hamlet knows that she has told a lie, for he has just seen Polonius peeping from behind the arras.

From that moment Ophelia's hold on Hamlet is a thing of the past, for, when once her innocence is suspected, her charm is gone. She has indeed less character than any other of Shakespeare's heroines. She has no initiative, no will-power. Once, and only once, she shows a touch of spirit, namely when she turns on her brother and bids him (Act I, Sc. iii, l. 47) not to do

> as some ungracious pastors do,
> Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven,
> Whilst, like a puff'd and reckless libertine,
> Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads.

Otherwise she is merely pretty, simple, submissive, and innocent. She receives Hamlet's advances with

pleasure, but throws him over, without a fight, when her brother preaches to her and her father scolds her. She allows herself to be used as a tool by Polonius to test her lover's state of mind, and she never resents Hamlet's rudeness. She would have cut rather a poor figure, if Shakespeare had not invested her end with an indescribable pathos.

Incidentally, he makes it quite clear that her madness is due to the death of her father and not to the loss of her lover.

(3) If Hamlet, after ceasing to love, had remained merely indifferent to Ophelia while she lived, and had been moved in the normal human way by her tragic fate and his own share in it, we should have had no quarrel with him. But he does not try to avoid her. He singles her out conspicuously in the play-scene (Act III, Sc. ii) and insults her in language of unpardonable grossness. It is true that Elizabethan standards differed in this respect from ours; but, as A. C. Bradley rightly insists, no other of Shakespeare's heroes talks like this to women. And then, after her death, when indifference becomes an offence, he exhibits a lack of taste and good feeling which almost takes one's breath away. His exclamation, "What, the fair Ophelia" (Act V, Sc. i, l. 267), when he recognises her body on the bier, may express emotion, but sounds much more like surprise: and a few minutes afterwards he is fighting in the grave with Laertes, the man whose father he has killed and whose sister is being buried. And why? He does indeed protest that he loved Ophelia more than "forty thousand brothers," but his speech is

merely an "out-heroding of Herod." His own explanation of the incident makes this evident:

> But I am very sorry, good Horatio,
> That to Laertes I forgot myself;
> For, by the image of my cause, I see
> The portraiture of his: I'll court his favours:
> But, sure, the bravery of his grief did put me
> Into a *towering passion.*
>
> (Act V, Sc. ii, l. 75.)

That is to say, he dislikes exaggeration, and thought that Laertes was over-doing the part of heart-broken brother.

How are we to account for all this?

Professor A. C. Bradley replies as follows:

> "That this embitterment, callousness, grossness, should be induced in a soul so pure and noble is profoundly tragic; and Shakespeare's business was to show this tragedy, not to paint an ideally beautiful soul unstained and undisturbed by the evil of the world and the anguish of conscious failure."

But this seems rather to beg the question; for our difficulty is to understand how a man who has naturally "a pure and noble soul" could ever be induced to behave like this by "the evil of the world and the anguish of conscious failure."

Moreover, we cannot help remembering that the unrelieved callousness which marks Hamlet's treatment of Ophelia is absent from his relations with his mother. Of one thing we are certain: if the story had been only the story of Hamlet and Ophelia, we

should have felt that Hamlet richly deserved his fate at the hands of Laertes.

§ 6. The Problem of the Ghost

In Act I the ghost is visible to everybody who is near enough to see it. It is seen by Bernardo, Marcellus, and Horatio, as well as by Hamlet. In Act III, Sc. iv, it is invisible to the Queen and seen only by Hamlet. This is a change from the objective to the subjective, from the cruder to the more subtle conception of the supernatural. We are reminded irresistibly of Banquo's ghost, and the Queen's words recall those of Lady Macbeth:

> Hamlet. Do you see nothing there?
> Queen. Nothing at all; yet all that is I see.
>
> . . . . .
>
> This is the very coinage of your brain:
> This bodiless creation ecstasy
> Is very cunning in.
>
> (Act III, Sc. iv, l. 132.)

We may conjecture that the objective ghost was a feature of the earlier Hamlet play; that the subjective form was Shakespeare's own idea; and that he has combined them at the expense of a little consistency.

But it is worth noticing that Hamlet's behaviour to the two apparitions is markedly different.

In Act I, Sc. v, he seems hardly to identify the ghost with his father. "Alas, poor ghost!" he says in line 4, not "poor father." And even after the

ghost has told him, "I am thy father's spirit" (l. 9), he uses such expressions as:

Ah, ha, boy! say'st thou so? art thou there, true-penny?
Come on: you hear this fellow in the cellarage.
(l. 149.)
Well said, old mole! canst work i' the earth so fast?
(l. 162.)
Rest, rest, perturbed spirit!
(l. 182.)

Contrast this with his language in Act III, Sc. iv:

Look you how pale he glares!
His form and cause conjoin'd, preaching to stones,
Would make them capable. Do not look upon me,
Lest with this piteous action you convert
My stern effects: then what I have to do
Will want true colour; tears perchance for blood.
(l. 125.)

And again:

Look how it steals away!
My father, in his habit, as he lived!
(l. 134.)

It may be argued that on the first occasion Hamlet was thrown completely off his balance and rendered hysterical by the shock and horror of what he saw and heard; whereas, on the second occasion, the play-scene had convinced him that the ghost really was his father, and he behaved accordingly. If this explanation fails to satisfy, we should have to assume that Shakespeare, when he wrote the first ghost scene, had in his mind a rather different conception of Hamlet from that which we generally

find in the central portions of the play. And, as a matter of fact, can we imagine that the Hamlet of Act III, Sc. iv, would ever, under any circumstances, have taken out his tablets and made notes ?

§ 7. The Problem of the Voyage to England

The first mention of the voyage to England occurs in Act III, Sc. i, l. 177, where the King informs Polonius that he has suddenly decided to get rid of Hamlet by sending him to England " for the demand of our neglected tribute." Polonius replies, " It shall do well." But he still thinks that love for Ophelia was " the origin and commencement of his " (Hamlet's) " grief," and suggests that, after the play, the Queen shall " all alone entreat him to show his grief; let her be round with him."

Accordingly, immediately after the play-scene (Act III, Sc. ii, l. 308), Rosencrantz, with Guildenstern, is sent to inform Hamlet that the Queen " desires to speak alone with him in her closet, ere he goes to bed," and Polonius comes in to confirm the summons.

Immediately after this (Act III, Sc. iii) the King, now thoroughly alarmed, sends for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, informs them that he intends to send them to England with Hamlet, that he will draw up their " commission " immediately and that they must make their preparations for instant departure. All this is news to them, and they express their acquiescence in courtly terms. Polonius then comes in, tells the King that Hamlet is " going to his mother's

closet," and himself hurries off to hide behind the arras there. The King falls on his knees in the adjoining oratory; Hamlet finds him there, spares him, and reaches his mother's closet.

Obviously, therefore, Hamlet can know nothing of what has just passed between the King and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Yet in the interview with his mother (Act III, Sc. iv, l. 199) he tells her that he is being sent to England, that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are to accompany him, and that there are "sealed letters" which excite his suspicions. We should have imagined that the voyage to England was still a secret between the King and Polonius, and when Hamlet is informed of it later in Act IV, Sc. iii, l. 42, he expresses surprise.

KING. Hamlet, this deed, for thine especial safety,
. . . . . must send thee hence
With fiery quickness: therefore prepare thyself;
The bark is ready and the wind at help,
The associates tend, and everything is bent
For England.
HAMLET. For England?
KING. Ay, Hamlet.

The King, therefore, has not told him before. It is possible, though most improbable, that Ophelia might have warned him, for she was present in Act III, Sc. i, and that his surprise is feigned; but he could not possibly know that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were to accompany him, or that there were "letters seal'd." The letters had not even been written. There is no escape from the difficulty.

But the more we study the close of Act III, Sc. iv, ll. 156–end, the stranger it appears. For not only does it present the difficulty which we have already dealt with, but it contains what looks very much like two alternative endings, each complete in itself, and each dealing with the same matter, but in an entirely different tone and temper. For the sake of clearness I give them both in full :

(*a*) QUEEN. O Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain.

HAM. O, throw away the worser part of it,
And live the purer with the other half.
Good night : but go not to my uncle's bed ;
Assume a virtue, if you have it not.
That monster, custom, who all sense doth eat,
Of habits devil, is angel yet in this,
That to the use of actions fair and good
He likewise gives a frock or livery,
That aptly is put on. Refrain to-night,
And that shall lend a kind of easiness
To the next abstinence ; the next more easy ;
For use almost can change the stamp of nature,
And either . . . the devil, or throw him out
With wondrous potency. Once more, good night :
And when you are desirous to be blest,
I'll blessing beg of you. For this same lord,
[*Pointing to Polonius.*
I do repent : but heaven hath pleased it so,
To punish me with this, and this with me,
That I must be their scourge and minister.
I will bestow him, and will answer well
The death I gave him. So, again, good night.
I must be cruel, only to be kind ;
Thus bad begins, and worse remains behind.

All this is exactly what we shall expect from the Hamlet of the soliloquies—reasoned, considerate, human. The third "good night" and the rhyming couplet suggest that the scene is ended, and we expect to find the stage direction, *Exit Hamlet with the body of Polonius.* Instead of this Hamlet continues:

(*b*) One word more, good lady.
QUEEN. What shall I do?
HAM. Not this, by no means, that I bid you do:
Let the bloat king tempt you again to bed;
Pinch wanton on your cheek, call you his mouse;
And let him, for a pair of reechy kisses,
Or paddling in your neck with his damn'd fingers,
Make you to ravel all this matter out,
That I essentially am not in madness,
But mad in craft. 'Twere good you let him know;
For who, that's but a queen, fair, sober, wise,
Would from a paddock, from a bat, a gib,
Such dear concernings hide? who would do so?
No, in despite of sense and secrecy,
Unpeg the basket on the house's top,
Let the birds fly, and like the famous ape,
To try conclusions, in the basket creep
And break your own neck down.
QUEEN. Be thou assured, if words be made of breath
And breath of life, I have no life to breathe
What thou hast said to me.
HAM. I must to England; you know that?
QUEEN. Alack!
I had forgot: 'tis so concluded on.
HAM.[1] *There's letters seal'd: and my two schoolfellows,*

[1] The lines printed in italics are omitted in the First Folio.

Whom I will trust as I will adders fang'd,
They bear the mandate ; they must sweep my way,
And marshal me to knavery. Let it work ;
For 'tis the sport to have the enginer
Hoist with his own petar : and't shall go hard
But I will delve one yard below their mines,
And blow them at the moon : O, 'tis most sweet
When in one line two crafts directly meet.
This man shall set me packing :
I'll lug the guts into the neighbour room.
Mother, good night. Indeed this counsellor
Is now most still, most secret and most grave,
Who was in life a foolish prating knave.
Come, sir, to draw toward an end with you.
Good night, mother.
[*Exeunt severally, Hamlet dragging in Polonius.*

The Hamlet of (*b*) is certainly a coarser and harsher Hamlet than the Hamlet of (*a*). For instance, " I will bestow him " becomes " I'll lug the guts into the neighbour room," words which recall the Amleth who threw Polonius' body to the pigs ; while " For this same lord, I do repent," hardens into " This man shall set me packing."

It is true, of course, that Hamlet is a man of many moods ; and, as the text stands, we must suppose that the line " One word more, good lady " marks a sudden change of feeling both towards the Queen and towards Polonius. But we may note,

(1) That the phrase " One word more " suggests a change of topic, whereas, " Not this . . . Let the bloat king tempt you again to bed," is only a repetition, in a more brutal form, of the " go not to my uncle's bed " of (*a*).

(2) That there are three "good nights" in (*a*): "Good night" (l. 159); "Once more, good night" (l. 170); "So, again, good night" (l. 177). But they begin all over again in (*b*): "Mother, good night" (l. 213)—not "again" or "once more good night": and finally "Good night, mother" (last line of scene).

(3) There is no reason for the sudden change of mood from the "And when you are desirous to be blest, I'll blessing beg of you" of (*a*) to the scornful "for who that's but a queen, fair, sober, wise" of (*b*); and there could certainly have been nothing in the dead body of the old man to obliterate the feeling of regret and provoke Hamlet to the brutal taunts of (*b*). Nor is there any other instance in the play of so abrupt a change of feeling without any apparent cause; for when in Act III, Sc. i, after a fair beginning—"Nymph, in thy orisons be all my sins remember'd"—he turns upon Ophelia with "Ha, ha! are you honest?" his mind has obviously been suddenly crossed by a suspicion excited by a movement behind the arras.

It seems, therefore, not impossible (to say the least of it) that (*a*) and (*b*) are two different ways of ending the scene in accordance with two different conceptions of Hamlet's character, a later and an earlier one, and that through carelessness on somebody's part both were incorporated in the acting version, like the two conceptions of Horatio in Act I. In any case, it is difficult to understand why the lines omitted, with good reason, in the First Folio, should have been restored to the accepted text.

They only serve to increase the difficulties inherent in the problem of the voyage to England.

§ 8. The Problem of the Feigned Madness

We can now approach what is always regarded as the central problem of the play, namely why did Hamlet waste four precious months? Why did he not at once fulfil his promise to the Ghost, and "sweep to his revenge"?

Of two things we can be certain. First, he was not deterred by any scruples of conscience. We must beware of reading into him our own aversion from bloodshed or from taking the law into our hands. Hamlet was not a twentieth-century humanitarian, but an Elizabethan. He might debate with himself whether it is nobler "to be or not to be," but he never doubted that it was a natural and sacred duty to avenge a father's murder by killing the murderer. Nor did he ever really doubt that the Ghost had spoken the truth. It was not lack of conviction which blunted his purpose. The damning proof, secured by the play-scene, brought him no nearer to action.

> How all occasions do inform against me,
> And spur my dull revenge! What is a man,
> If his chief good and market of his time
> Be but to sleep and feed? a beast, no more.
> (Act IV, Sc. iv, l. 32.)

In the second place, there was nothing outside himself to prevent him from carrying out his intention. He had access to the King, and the run of the

palace ; even when he had come to be regarded as a dangerous and turbulent lunatic he was master of his own time and movements, and could go where he liked with a sword at his side. Once only, immediately after the murder of Polonius, do we find him disarmed and guarded ; and, after his return from the abortive voyage to England, he once again enjoyed complete liberty. He had, therefore, every opportunity for taking his revenge ; and he knew it. Two months after the Ghost's revelations he could still say,

> I do not know
> Why yet I live to say ' this thing's to do,'
> Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means,
> To do't.
>
> (Act IV, Sc. iv, l. 43.)

The obstacle, therefore, was something within himself, some paralysis of the will which made him incapable of making use of his " strength and means " and carrying out what he always regarded as a plain duty.

But, before we consider the nature and cause of this obstacle, it will be convenient to dispose first of the problem of the feigned madness. That Hamlet did feign madness is, of course, beyond doubt. He warns Horatio and Marcellus that he is going to " put an antic disposition on " (Act I, Sc. v, l. 172) and he proceeds immediately afterwards to do so. He tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that his mother and uncle are mistaken, and that he is not as mad as they think him (Act II, Sc. ii, l. 394) ; he confides to his mother that he is not really mad but " mad in craft "

(Act III, Sc. iv, l. 187); and, finally, he is always absolutely sane in his soliloquies and when talking to Horatio. Why then did he wish to be thought mad? In the original story Amleth feigns madness in order to disarm his uncle's suspicions and make his own position safe; and this feigning of madness was such an essential part of the story, and so widely known, that a play which omitted it would hardly have been accepted as a play about Hamlet; for Elizabethan audiences were conservative. In short, Hamlet *had* to feign madness. But Shakespeare had to find a new motive for it; for his Hamlet had no personal danger to fear and no suspicions to disarm. His mother's affection for *him* and the King's infatuation for *her* made him perfectly safe. Claudius, moreover, knew nothing about the Ghost scene, and had no idea that his own life was in danger, till innuendoes and veiled threats excited his alarm.

Obviously, Hamlet's best policy was to feign, not madness, but acquiescence; to seem to accept the situation, and wait for the most favourable moment for action. But that would have involved a dissimulation of which he was incapable. He could not "smile and smile" with "bloody thoughts" in his heart. He could not be silent, when he had so much to say, for he was a man who loved to "unpack his heart with words." He could not even keep a secret. So, instead of acting the part of a dutiful and contented heir apparent, he feigned madness. Perhaps he had an idea in his mind that this would make it easier for him to fall suddenly on the King and slay him. Anyhow, it enabled him to give free vent to his feelings; to be

insolent to his uncle, bitter to Ophelia, and consistently rude to Polonius ; to hint at what he knew and intended to do ; to say such things as, " we will have no more marriages : those that are married already, all but one, shall live ; the rest shall keep as they are " (Act III, Sc. i, l. 154), and all without having to offer any explanation ; for nobody expects reason from a lunatic. It even made it possible for him to produce the play-scene, without provoking too grave a scandal. But he had to pay the penalty. For one thing, the King could not fail to see that there was " method in his madness," and begin to fear for his own safety. For another, a man cannot deliberately encourage and indulge every passing mood and fancy without losing something of his normal self-control. This is perhaps the explanation of Hamlet's extraordinary behaviour by the grave-side of Ophelia.

§ 9. Hamlet's Character

What then was that " something within himself " which made it impossible for Hamlet to carry out the duty which he felt to have been imposed on him ? Before we can answer that question, we must consider briefly what kind of a man he was normally, and what was his mental state at the opening of the play. And we will take the latter point first.

We find, then, that about two months after his father's death, and before he has discovered the secret of his uncle's guilt, Hamlet is suffering from

great depression of spirits, and, if we may for the moment forget that he has in the meanwhile been falling in love with and courting Ophelia, we should guess that he has been in this state ever since his return from Wittenberg, and possibly for longer. He is disillusioned with life ; the things that he used to delight in no longer interest him. He is even toying with the idea of suicide.

> O, that this too too solid flesh would melt,
> Thaw and resolve itself into a dew !
> Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
> His canon 'gainst self-slaughter ! O God ! God !
> How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable
> Seem to me all the uses of this world !
> (Act I, Sc. ii, l. 129.)

He describes his symptoms in very much the same terms, two months later, to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Act II, Sc. ii. He tells them that he has lost all his mirth and forgone all custom of exercises ; the beauty of the world has become to him " a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours," man delights him not, no, nor woman neither. And in the famous soliloquy in Act III, Sc. i, he is still harping on the idea of suicide.

This kind of melancholy is not madness. It is generally due to nervous exhaustion ; a black depression to which neurotics are particularly liable, and which quite normal people have experienced after a bad attack of influenza. It does not change a man's moral nature, but it paralyses many of his normal activities, and blunts his natural feelings. Any great

and unexpected shock would be certain to aggravate all the worst symptoms.

At no time, therefore, in the course of the play do we see the normal Hamlet. How, we may ask, did he differ from the Hamlet that we do see? Let us consider what three of the other characters in the play have to tell us about him.

(*a*) Young Fortinbras says that he was likely, if he had become king, "to have proved most royally"; but that does not tell us much.

(*b*) Ophelia in Act III, Sc. i, is more vivid. She exclaims:

O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!
The courtier's, scholar's, soldier's, eye, tongue, sword:
The expectancy and rose of the fair state,
The glass of fashion, and the mould of form.

It is certainly difficult to make this description fit the Hamlet of the play. Scholar? yes; soldier? possibly. But can the man who preferred Wittenberg and the society of Horatio to the court of Elsinore, who despised the Osrics and could not tolerate the "tedious old" counsellors, ever have been a courtier? And can we imagine Hamlet as ever having been the "glass of fashion"? Surely he was too indifferent to externals, too utterly contemptuous of outward shows, to have taken the smallest interest in his dress and appearance. As for "the mould of form," his mother calls him "fat and scant of breath" (Act V, Sc. ii, l. 298). But perhaps we ought not to press that.

(*c*) The King, who is certainly not partial, tells Laertes that Hamlet is "remiss" (i.e. careless), "most

generous and free from all contriving." And this, if we may forget the episode of the voyage to England, is how we should ourselves describe him.

For, when in the last scene of all Horatio exclaims, "Now cracks a noble heart," we feel that he is speaking the truth. Indeed, if Hamlet had not been noble, there would have been no tragedy. In order to justify our conception of Hamlet as an intrinsically noble nature, let us consider his character as he himself reveals it in the play; and let us, for the present, deliberately omit any qualities, words, or actions, which are out of harmony with that idea.

He is naturally sensitive and affectionate. He loved and admired his father: his language about him is always the language of genuine affection and respect:

> He was a man; take him for all in all,
> I shall not look upon his like again.

And he loved his mother. If he had not loved her, the shock of the discovery of her guilt would not have had such a devastating effect on him. There is real pathos in the words:

> You are the queen, your husband's brother's wife;
> And,—would it were not so!—you are my mother.
> (Act III, Sc. iv, l. 15.)

And as soon as the Queen shows signs of remorse—"O Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain"—he ceases to be stern and becomes almost tender. His friendship for Horatio is loyal, disinterested, and warm. His reception of his old "schoolfellows,"

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (Act II, Sc. ii), is at first cordial and affectionate. They themselves report to the Queen that he received them " most like a gentleman." He appeals to them by " the rights of fellowship, by the consonancy of youth, by the obligation of our ever-preserved love," to be frank with him. Even when he knows that they are playing him false, he can exercise a kind of gentle impatience with them, as in Act III, Sc. ii, l. 379, when, after making Rosencrantz admit that he cannot play upon a pipe, he turns on him with the words :

> Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me ! You would pluck out the heart of my mystery ; you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass ; and there is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ ; yet cannot you make it speak. 'Sblood, do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe ? Call me what instrument you will, though you can fret me, yet you cannot play upon me.

Charming too is his welcome of the players in Act II, Sc. ii ; intimate, cordial, frank. " O, my old friend ! Why thy face is valanced since I saw thee last." He gives himself no airs of superiority whatever ; they are his equals, his fellow-men, his " good friends."

And with this kindly nature goes a trustful disposition. He is a generous, and not a shrewd, judge of character. He tells Horatio that Laertes is a " very noble youth " (Act V, Sc. i, l. 247), which he most certainly is not. And he is incapable of concealing his feelings. He may confide to his mother

that he is " mad in craft " (Act III, Sc. iv, l. 187), but there is no craft behind his " madness " : not even common caution. He blurts out to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, at their first meeting, that his " uncle-father and aunt-mother are deceived " ; that he is only mad north-north-west ; when the wind is southerly, he can tell a hawk from a handsaw (Act II, Sc. ii, l. 396). Nor does he even attempt to conceal from them that he *has* a secret which he is anxious to conceal.

And in the play-scene he practically puts all his cards on the table and invites the King to trump them. A man like this is incapable of plots and intrigues. We feel that Hamlet would never be able to elaborate a policy and carry it out coolly and deliberately. He is too frank, too impetuous, too indiscreet, too much a creature of moods and impulses. Moreover, he is a critic of life rather than a man of action. He has no itch to reform the world. His cry :

> The time is out of joint : O cursed spite,
> That ever I was born to set it right !
> (Act I, Sc. v, l. 189.)

may reasonably be taken to represent his normal attitude towards action.

We find, too, that he is introspective. He is immensely interested in his own thoughts and fond of self-analysis. But he has an imaginative sympathy which carries him beyond the range of his personal experience. When he inveighs against

> The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
> The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,

> The insolence of office, and the spurns
> That patient merit of the unworthy takes,
> (Act III, Sc. i, l. 71.)

he is feeling for the wrongs of others; for in his exalted and privileged position he cannot have had to endure these things himself. We are conscious, of course, that Shakespeare has put a great deal of himself into Hamlet. Sometimes, perhaps, almost more than the character can rightly bear. But the fact that Shakespeare is his spiritual father undoubtedly adds to Hamlet's attractiveness. Intellectually he is brilliant; but he has no real philosophy of life, though the sense of impotence and failure tends to make him a fatalist.

> And that should learn us
> There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
> Rough-hew them how we will.
> (Act V, Sc. ii, l. 9.)

Not a whit; we defy augury: there is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come: the readiness is all.
(Act V, Sc. ii, l. 230.)

He has a quick apprehension and a strongly marked vein of ironic humour. He has too the poet's instinctive feeling for beauty. He is conscious of his own powers and delights in them.

> Sure, he that made us with such large discourse,
> Looking before and after, gave us not
> That capability and god-like reason
> To fust in us unused.
> (Act IV, Sc. iv, l. 36.)

And again :

> What a piece of work is a man ! how noble in reason ! how infinite in faculty ! in form and moving how express and admirable ! in action how like an angel ! in apprehension how like a god ! the beauty of the world ! the paragon of animals !
>
> (Act II, Sc. ii, l. 315.)

Above all, he has the genius of language. Shakespeare has endowed him richly with his own peculiar gift, the magic use of words. No other character in the plays says quite so many unforgettable things in such a perfect form. He can hardly open his lips without a pearl falling from them. " The undiscovered country from whose bourne no traveller returns " ; " the readiness is all " ; " this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof, fretted with golden fire " ; " there's nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so. To me Denmark is a prison " ; " thus conscience doth make cowards of us all " ; " absent thee from felicity a while " ; " the rest is silence."

How could a man, who thinks and speaks like this, be anything but noble ?

§ 10. The Problem of Delay

If we may assume that such was Hamlet's character and continue to ignore anything which seems to strike a different note, we can easily understand two things : first, that the task imposed on him would have been most distasteful at any time ; and secondly, that under the special circumstances created

for him in the play it might well have proved impossible.

For we must remember that, from the very first, we are dealing with a Hamlet who has been gripped by a deep and settled melancholy. That is a physical condition in which the mere idea of sustained and concentrated effort is more than irksome. The brain becomes incapable of making plans, the body of carrying them into effect. Nothing seems worth doing, and yet the things left undone weigh on the conscience as an intolerable burden.

On the top of this, in Hamlet's case, comes the discovery that his father has been murdered by his uncle, and that his mother has at least committed adultery. The shock of such a discovery might conceivably startle a man out of himself and sting him into action. If it did not, it would almost certainly plunge him into yet deeper depths, paralyse his will, and reduce him to a state of apathy, broken at times by gusts of passion or remorse. That apparently is what happens to Hamlet ; and, thenceforth, we watch the conflict between his conscience, which bids him act, and the " weakness and melancholy " (his own description of his condition in Act II, Sc. ii, l. 630) which makes action impossible.

What would he have done, or tried to do, if he had been in his normal state ?

He might have roused the populace, stormed the palace, and overpowered the guard. There was no need for him to produce any formal evidence. What Laertes could do easily in Act IV, Sc. v, Hamlet could have done more easily still ; for he was " loved

of the distracted multitude " (Act IV, Sc. iii, l. 4), and he had many friends in the court. That such an idea was in his mind, is indicated by his words in Act II, Sc. ii, l. 577 :

Is it not monstrous that this player here,
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul so to his own conceit
That from her working all his visage wann'd ;
Tears in his eyes, distraction in's aspect ?
. . . . . What would he do,
Had he the motive and the cue for passion
That I have ? He would drown the stage with tears,
And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,
Make mad the guilty and appal the free,
Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed
The very faculties of eyes and ears.
Yet I,
A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak,
Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,
And can *say* nothing.

Since sustained action of this kind was impossible for him in his low and morbid condition, the only alternative was to fall suddenly upon the King and kill him out of hand—a singularly odious duty for an honourable man. For the King would not only have been a distressingly easy victim, but he had, so far as Hamlet was concerned, behaved with forbearance and at least with an outward show of friendliness :

Think of us
As of a father : for let the world take note,
You are the most immediate to our throne,

> And with no less nobility of love
> Than that which dearest father bears his son
> Do I impart toward you.
> (Act I, Sc. ii, l. 107.)

and he entreats Hamlet to remain at Elsinore, " our chiefest courtier, cousin, and our son."

No doubt, this was mere hypocrisy; but, having got what he wanted, the throne and his brother's wife, the King would have been content to leave well alone if his nephew had consented to accept the situation. He certainly had no designs on Hamlet's life till the threat, " those that are married already, all but one, shall live," warned him of his danger, and the murder of Polonius reinforced the lesson:

> O heavy deed!
> It had been so with us, had we been there.
> (Act IV, Sc. i, l. 13.)

But this very forbearance would make the task of killing him all the more repugnant. To fall suddenly upon a man who refuses to take offence and insists on being friendly would smack of treachery, and Hamlet, though he may have been a soldier, was no Joab. It seems as if, under the cloak of madness, he were sometimes deliberately trying to put his enemy on his guard, to goad him into some form of retaliation. He almost gloats (in Act. V, Sc. ii, l. 63) over his discovery of the King's treachery towards himself; as if it provided him with the justification which his sense of honour demanded. For, if only the King would do something provocative, he might find the

sudden impulse to slay—as he did, when he mistook Polonius behind the arras " for his better." Without some provocation of this kind, some act which will kindle a sudden blaze of passion, Hamlet cannot do the deed ; for it is a deed which requires either hot blood or a cold resolute will ; and Hamlet has neither. His habitual mood is one of " bestial oblivion " (Act IV, Sc. iv, l. 40), and his purpose quails before the thought of action and what must follow it.

For suppose that he does succeed in overcoming his inertia for a moment and kills the King ; what is to happen next ? This is what he is thinking of, when he speaks of " some craven scruple of thinking too precisely on the event " (Act IV, Sc. iv, l. 41). He is not, of course, afraid of anything that might happen to himself, for he is, physically, as brave as a lion, and he is out of love with life. " You cannot," he says to Polonius (Act II, Sc. ii, l. 219), " take anything from me that I would more willingly part withal (i.e. Polonius' company) : except my life, except my life, except my life."

Nor, as a matter of fact, was his own life likely to be in any danger. Nobody intervened to save the King when the vengeance actually fell. Hamlet could have stepped over the body of the dead man to the throne. He was the son of the late King, the heir apparent to the crown. Who would or could have opposed him ?

But Hamlet was not a man like Macbeth, who could kill and render no account. He would have had to give explanations, to justify his action, to convince others ; and, in order to do so, he would

have to tell a story which would leave his mother at least under a cloud of grave suspicion. Moreover, he had added to his difficulties by feigning madness. Everybody would suppose that he had killed the King in one of his attacks of dangerous lunacy. He would have to undeceive them, to convince them that he was not really mad, before he could gain credence for his story of treachery and murder. But what rational explanation could he give of his pretended madness ? He might indeed appeal to Horatio and Marcellus ; but there had never been any real necessity for the move, and he had acted the part too well.

From all the effort that would be involved in unravelling this tangled skein, his weary mind sinks back into apathy.

We gather that, during the months of inaction, he is brooding chiefly, not over his father's death, but over the futility of life and his own disillusionment. That, at all events, is the gist of his soliloquy in Act III, Sc. i.

He welcomes anything that will for a moment make him forget himself—the arrival of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, till he suspects their motives ; the coming of the players, even the voyage to England and the fencing bout with Laertes which is to win a wager for the King !

But from time to time something happens which reminds him of his unaccomplished duty—the emotion of the player over Hecuba, the sight of men marching " to their graves like beds " for a point of honour ; and then he reproaches himself for his

indifference. For it is his indifference much more than his impotence that perplexes him. He cannot explain it to himself. He tries to believe that he must be a coward, but he knows that he is not. He tries to lash himself into passion by calling the King names :

> Bloody, bawdy villain !
> Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain !
> O vengeance !

But he has to break off with " Why, what an ass am I ! " (Act II, Sc. ii, l. 611). He does persuade himself (*ibid.*, l. 627) that there is still some uncertainty about his uncle's guilt ; but conviction, when he has achieved it through the play-scene, does not help him. It is in vain that he cries :

> O, from this time forth,
> My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth !
> (Act IV, Sc. iv, l. 65.)

His mind remains morbid and bloodless, interested in the grave-digger and skulls, contemptuously amused with Osric, obsessed with the idea of Fate and human impotence ; till he has received his death wound, and his mother has been poisoned. And then at last he acts.

§ 11. The Real Problem

The foregoing explanation of Hamlet's delay is quite intelligible, so long as we turn a blind eye on those portions of the play which seem to conflict

with it. For there is in the play another side to Hamlet—one feels almost tempted to say there is another Hamlet ; and it is necessary now to take this other side into account.

There is the Hamlet who is not only harsh but brutal in his behaviour to Ophelia ; the Hamlet who " lugs the guts " of Polonius into the neighbour room, insults the dead body, and tells the King that if he " does not find it within a month " he will " nose it as he goes up the stairs into the lobby " (Act IV, Sc. iii, l. 37) ; the Hamlet who runs away from Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, crying, " Hide fox, and all after " (Act IV, Sc. ii, l. 32)—a most undignified Hamlet ; and there is the Hamlet who picks a quarrel with Laertes in Ophelia's grave, and afterwards offers an apology in terms that are transparently insincere.

This speech is worth quoting in full :

Give me your pardon, sir : I've done you wrong ;
But pardon't, as you are a gentleman.
This presence knows,[1]
And you must needs have heard, how I am punish'd
With sore distraction. What I have done,
That might your nature, honour and exception
Roughly awake, I here proclaim was madness.
Was't Hamlet wrong'd Laertes ? Never Hamlet :
If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away,
And when he's not himself does wrong Laertes,
Then Hamlet does it not, Hamlet denies it.
Who does it then ? His madness : if't be so,
Hamlet is of the faction that is wrong'd ;
His madness is poor Hamlet's enemy.
Sir, in this audience,

[1] The italics are my own.

Let my disclaiming from a purposed evil
Free me so far in your most generous thoughts,
That I have shot mine arrow o'er the house,
And hurt my brother.[1]

(Act V, Sc. ii, l. 237.)

We note several things about this speech:

(1) The last two lines refer naturally and unambiguously to the killing of Polonius.

(2) Hamlet begins with a frank admission that he has done Laertes wrong.

(3) Then, in the italicised lines, he lays the blame on his "madness." This is simply disingenuous quibbling. Hamlet never believed himself to be mad, as we know from his confidential remarks on the subject to Horatio, to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and to the Queen; and he killed Polonius behind the arras simply and solely because he mistook him for the King. This part of the apology, therefore, comes strangely from the Hamlet whose frankness and lack of discretion have won our sympathies. If we might suppose that we have here part of an earlier version of the speech dovetailed into a later one, the difficulty would disappear, for the lines *not* in italics form by themselves a complete, generous, and characteristic apology.

And, lastly, there is the Hamlet of the abortive voyage to England. This episode is so remarkable that we must treat it in some detail.

In Act III, Sc. iv, l. 205 (the lines have been quoted before, but the reader will pardon the repeti-

[1] The First Folio, by a curious slip, has "mother."

tion), when he is telling his mother that he " must to England," Hamlet adds :

> Let it work ; [1]
> For 'tis the sport to have the enginer
> Hoist with his own petar : and't shall go hard
> But I will delve one yard below their mines
> And blow them at the moon : O, 'tis most sweet
> When in one line two crafts directly meet.

This means that Hamlet welcomes the idea of a contest of wits, craft matched with craft. It will involve constant alertness, consecutive thought and effort, but he does not shrink from the prospect ; he delights in it, and in the opportunity it will give him for showing his cunning.

In Act V, Sc. ii, l. 1, he relates to Horatio how the " enginer was hoist."

One night he was unable to sleep. There was " a kind of fighting " in his heart, a providential foreboding, which sent him on to the deck to finger for the sealed packet in the pockets of the sleeping Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. As he knew that there were sealed letters, whose import he mistrusted, and as he had said (Act IV, Sc. iii, l. 50) that he " saw a cherub " who saw through the King's purposes, one would have thought that to get possession of these letters would be the first item in his programme for " delving below the mines," and not the result of a sudden inspiration. But, as Polonius says, " let that pass." He carried off the letters to his cabin, opened,

[1] These lines are in the Second Quarto, but not in the First Folio.

read them, and discovered that he was being sent to execution in England. Whereupon, he sat down, devised a new commission, wrote it out fair, and sealed it with his father's signet which happened to be the Danish seal. The new commission instructed the English authorities to kill the bearers, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, immediately on their landing, " not shriving time allowed."

Hamlet does not say what part he allotted to himself. Obviously, he could not have known that he would be separated from his companions.

Having completed his task, he placed the " changeling " in the pockets from which the original had been abstracted, and returned to his cabin to sleep.

On the next day they were overtaken by a pirate, and forced to fight. Hamlet was the first to board the enemy ship, and, as soon as he had done so, the vessels parted, and, somehow, the slower one managed to make her escape. Hamlet was left a prisoner on board, but the pirates treated him well, and, in return for a favour, landed him on the Danish coast (Act IV, Sc. vi, l. 12). As for his companions, Hamlet says complacently (Act V, Sc. ii, l. 58) :

> They are not near my conscience.

Now what strikes us most forcibly about all this is, that the Hamlet which it reveals is not only a cunning but a singularly callous and vindictive Hamlet ; and of all qualities vindictiveness is the last which we naturally associate with him. It is true that Rosen-

crantz and Guildenstern had forfeited all the claims of friendship, but they were not privy to the King's intentions, and Hamlet had no reason to suppose that they were. One gathers that he does not so suppose. He implies that they deserve their fate simply because they have meddled in matters with which they were not concerned :

> 'Tis dangerous when the baser nature comes
> Between the pass and fell incensed points
> Of mighty opposites.
>
> (Act V, Sc. ii, l. 60.)

as though it were Fate, and not he, who had sent them to their death.

But they had been his friends once, and he had appealed to them, not without feeling, " by the consonancy of our youth and the obligation of our ever-preserved love." Moreover, their death was in no way necessary for his purposes. The forged commission might quite well have instructed the authorities in England to imprison them till further notice, and to send him (Hamlet) back to Denmark at once. The death sentence was a gratuitous piece of revenge, excessive for the offence, and incompatible with an affectionate and generous nature.

This brings us to what is surely the real problem of the play, namely can we reconcile these different aspects of Hamlet ? Can we fit all the pieces together in such a way that they form a consistent and convincing whole ? And, if we cannot, is the fault ours or Shakespeare's ?

Some students of *Hamlet* have solved the puzzle

by simply ignoring the pieces that do not fit. Others have faced the difficulties squarely and satisfied themselves that they are not insuperable. These include the best-known Shakespearean scholars, men whose authority cannot lightly be set aside. Some tell us that the flaws in Hamlet's character are not natural to him, but are " induced " by circumstances which have proved too strong for him ; that he is by nature generous and frank, confiding, but that suffering and a sense of impotence make him sometimes harsh, secretive, and suspicious. Others remind us that perfect consistency is not a part of human nature ; that the most generous are sometimes mean, the most honest sometimes act crookedly : and that if there is a Mr. Hyde in Hamlet as well as a Dr. Jekyll—why, so much the more Hamlet he ! All assume that, to Shakespeare at all events, the Hamlet of our play was a complete and coherent character. But are we, after all, obliged to make this assumption ? When we find so many instances of careless workmanship in the play—the two Horatios, the uncertainty about the Queen's guilt, the muddle, for it is nothing less, about the voyage to England—are we not justified in suspecting that Hamlet too may have suffered from the same confusion ? That he is in fact, to some extent, a compromise between the Hamlet of Kyd's play and Shakespeare's Hamlet ; that is to say, between Shakespeare's first and second thoughts about him ? Nobody can deny that there are discrepancies in the play which the utmost ingenuity can never really reconcile. Is it not, perhaps, better to give up being ingenious, to accept the discre-

pancies frankly as discrepancies, and to find in the conditions under which Shakespeare did his work a simpler solution of our difficulties? If we feel free to indulge these speculations, we should conjecture that, when he first took up the theme, Shakespeare thought of Hamlet as a young man who, like his friend Horatio, had always lived at Elsinore, and who had fallen in love with Ophelia before his father's death; that, when he came to ponder over the causes of the delay, he realized how much more plausible they would become if his hero were an older and more introspective man; that, accordingly, he raised Hamlet's age to thirty, emphasised his intellectual side, and made Horatio a scholar-friend from Wittenberg; that the more he thought about his hero in this guise—the scholar, poet, thinker, disillusioned with life and faced with an intolerable duty—the more he was attracted by him, till he ended by almost identifying himself with his creation. So Hamlet grew to giant proportions. But then, instead of going back to the beginning and re-writing the whole play, Shakespeare did with his own work what he had so often done with the work of other men: namely, he used his first draft as a frame-work, wrote his mature conception of Hamlet into the crucial scenes, deleted here and added there, but left large portions of the manuscript unrevised—thereby, incidentally, saving himself much time and trouble.

A critical examination of the whole text is beyond the scope of this study, as is any attempt to fix a date for the original draft, though it might well have been composed a good deal earlier than the *Hamlet*

of the Second Quarto, possibly even in the early 1590's. But roughly it may be suggested that at least Act I, Sc. i; Act I, Sc. ii, ll. 192–end; Act I, Scs. iii, iv and v; Act II, Sc. i, ll. 74–end; Act III, Sc. ii, ll. 97–359; Act III, Sc. iv, ll. 1–33 and ll. 179–end; Act IV, Scs. ii, iii, v and vi; Act V, Sc. ii, ll. 1–70, and ll. 240–50, formed part of the first version of the play. It is possible, too, that some of the misfits are due, not to Shakespeare, but to his fellow-actors who were in possession of his different versions.

But is it possible, many will ask, that when he gave to the world a work of his mature genius Shakespeare should have been content to let it go forth in a state which he must have known to be imperfect? The answer to that question depends entirely on what we suppose to have been Shakespeare's attitude to his own work. One thing we must always remember: when he wrote *Hamlet*, Shakespeare was not a man of leisure with a comfortable income (like Tennyson or Browning), who could sit in his study, when he felt in the mood, and think out great works of art. He was a very busy member of a thriving theatrical company, with a family and his own future to provide for; and the most important and most lucrative of his multifarious occupations was to provide plays for his company—lucrative, because his plays were popular, and, apart from the cash down which he received for them (which was not much), he had a share in the profits of the theatre.

And he produced the plays required of him, not only in an amazing number,[1] but also at a prodigious

[1] Twenty-two *great* plays (besides others) in twenty years.

speed. We may imagine that for him and his partners the vital question about any play would be, not, is it a work of art, but, will it act? And from the first, *Hamlet* acted. It still acts—even in modern dress. The problems which puzzle us in the study do not trouble us on the stage. The excitement of the story and the compelling interest of the chief character sweep us along. We have no time to analyse; we cannot turn back to see what has been said before; we take everything for granted.

Shakespeare's contemporaries did not submit his plays to any searching literary criticism. They enjoyed them as plays; and, no doubt, that was how he meant them to be enjoyed. He did not intend them to be carried to the dissecting-room and examined under a microscope. They produced the effect which he meant them to produce. They do so still. What more could be asked for?

But the plays have become literature; the problems are there; and to twentieth-century minds they cry aloud for an answer. Whatever view we may take of those problems, and whatever solution we may offer, it is surely best to admit frankly that *Hamlet*, though it is one of the greatest of plays, is not what it has been so often called, a perfect work of art. To do otherwise is to shut our eyes wilfully to obvious flaws and discrepancies. But to make this admission is not to belittle Shakespeare. Nobody doubts that, if he had had the time and the inclination, he could have made of *Hamlet* a perfect work of art. The only doubt is, whether he would have had the inclination. He was not responsible for the conditions under

which he worked, and to recognise them only makes him appear the more wonderful. For the marvel is, not that he did not always give us his best, but that so much of what he gave is greater than anything which anybody else has given us. Nor is it to belittle *Hamlet*. If we forget the jarring notes—and it is much easier to forget than to remember—there remains a central figure of surpassing interest and genius, which has gripped the imagination of the learned and the unlearned in all ages, and which will continue to fascinate so long as the mind of man is haunted by the mystery of life and death.

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